



Press Ups and Downs

Fleet Street is passing away - in a topographical sense, at least, as newspaper businesses queue up to escape the claustrophobia and high costs of the City. However, 'Fleet Street', as the generic term covering the relatively homogeneous group of newspapers that constitutes the national press, seems likely to remain applicable for some time yet. If the locations and technology are changing, the overriding journalistic values are not.

Not quite yet, that is. The press, in fact, seems at the end of a cycle of change which has occurred over the past 20 years and which is equal in importance to that which happened at the turn of the century. From the beginning, newspapers deemed worthy of report only very specifically defined matters, which included lengthy, frequently verbatim, coverage of parliament and notable trials.

The arrival of the *Daily Telegraph* and the popular, Northcliffe press changed

that. A fresh set of values, embracing such areas as motor-car design and fashions at Ascot, were placed alongside the traditional ones; the social juxtaposed with the political and legal.

The second critical change in UK newspaper evolution was brought by Rupert Murdoch. He discarded altogether original notions of news and concentrated entirely on the popular and ephemeral. In doing so he arrived at a definition of news which was equally as narrow as that which had pertained in the 19th century, and the boundaries of which were marked by (in approximate diminishing order of importance) television, royalty, violent crime and sex.

It seemed illogical, but suddenly affairs of state were beyond the purview of some newspapers. Neil Kinnock announcing plans to cut unemployment was not news; Neil Kinnock grappling with would-be muggers

outside an Indian restaurant was.

Newspapers at the opposite, quality, end of the market, found their abilities to cover the news inhibited in three interconnected ways. Firstly, the swift penetration of colour tv meant that television could report the news faster and more graphically. The Ethiopian famine would presumably not have been so heart-rending for so many millions had pictures of it appeared merely in newspapers.

Secondly, rising costs and fierce competition have together ensured that newspapers employ fewer correspondents throughout the world; at the same time as the technology has improved to allow news to be transmitted that much faster, British newspaper readers have been receiving less well-informed coverage of foreign events.

Most important, however, is the new-found sophistication of pressure groups, and the increasing stranglehold

being exercised by 'news'-disseminating organisations over news-gathering ones. A journalist today can probably sit in his or her office and select stories from the tide of publicity material that flows to the desk. Groups have not only a media spokesperson, but a media strategy; a plan determining whether an issue is best raised on Radio 4's *Today* programme or on TV-am; in *The Guardian* or the *Daily Express*.

The development of this system has disadvantaged 'pure' journalism in two respects. It becomes impossible for a journalist to distinguish between the well-presented claims of particular groups who, when setting out their case, do not need to be guided by such considerations as objective truth. Many organisations have been able to ensure that complete lies are widely accepted. In the mid-70s the CIA successfully planted a number of stories concerning atrocities of leftwing groups; in April 1986, President Gadhafi of Libya was able to persuade the world that his adopted daughter was killed in the US bombing raid on Tripoli.

At the same time, the newspapers themselves no longer set the agenda. Just as Harold Wilson timed the HMS *Fearless* talks in 1968 with Rhodesian leader Ian Smith to coincide with (and thereby diminish the news-value of) the Conservative Party conference, so publicity directors determine not only what is news, but when it becomes news.

The quality papers have reacted to these developments by giving increased space to analysis; by increasing feature space at the expense of news. Thus, just as tabloid papers like *The Sun* have stolen the clothes of tittle-tattle weeklies like *Reveille* and *Tit-Bits*, so the quality press (and in particular *The Guardian*) has impinged on the territory of publications like the *New Statesman*.

As the quality broadsheets and the popular tabloids moved in opposite direc-

tions, and as the competition for circulation and advertising intensified, so the middle ground disappeared completely. The *News Chronicle* died at the end of the 50s, and the *Daily Herald* in the 60s. *The Mail* and *Express* survived by going tabloid, and downmarket. The only publication which at present comes close to bridging this gap between the serious and the (generally) salacious is *The Times*, which has undergone a transformation under Murdoch's ownership and sharply curtailed the length of its news stories.

Nevertheless, the new technology that is in part responsible for the Fleet Street diaspora is also supposed, by reducing costs, to bring in its wake enhanced possibilities for newspaper production which no one who believes in a pluralistic press could regret. The first arrival was Eddie Shah's *Today*, born as a decent (ie honourable) paper which tried to encamp on the evacuated middle ground. It had new technology, full colour, an unquestionably able team of journalists, but no clear idea of where it was going. In so far as a vision did exist, it was plainly misconceived. There was little point in using colour, since television did that sort of thing so much better. It was worthwhile trying to be decent, but that hardly qualified as a *raison d'être*. In the event, *Today* only began to make commercial sense when it jettisoned its fastidious notions of good taste and plunged into the tabloids' cesspit with a week-long serialisation of the most sordid and sickening story of them all, the Moors Murders.

By contrast, *The Independent* perceived precisely what it wanted to be. It aimed to reassert mainstream newspaper virtues which were no longer, so its founders believed, adequately represented in contemporary journalism. Thus far, it has helped to restore dignity and balance to the discredited ranks of the British press. It has highlighted particular stories - like the extraordinary number of secret trials in the UK - and pursued them

tenaciously. There is much room for improvement yet, but any interim assessment must begin with the essential point that it encourages its journalists to be journalists. The overwhelming bulk of its circulation is in London and the southeast (90%, or so it is rumoured), possibly because old habits die harder elsewhere in the country.

Similarly, the *London Daily News (LDN)* had the benefit of a specific gap in the market at which to aim. Once again, a first-class editorial team was assembled. Its morale could hardly have been boosted by the 50% price-cut in the first week of publication. Nevertheless, like *The Independent*, the *LDN* promises to be viable and valuable. In only its second week, it played a leading role in resurrecting the story about police corruption in Kent.

It is not possible to feel as sanguine about *News on Sunday*, the left of centre tabloid launched this month. The reputation of the *Sunday Times* has plummeted in the wake of the dispersal of the team which Harold Evans built up there. *The Observer* has remained sadly undercapitalised - its owners, Lorrho, preferring to invest in *Today*. There are, it could be argued, three excellent papers published daily (*The Guardian* and *Financial Times*, as well as *The Independent*), but none at all on Sunday. Despite all this, it is still difficult to predict success for *News on Sunday*. One suspects that an upmarket paper, to appeal to disenfranchised former *Sunday Times*' readers, would have been successful. A downmarket paper, challenging the tabloid virility of the *News of the World* and *The People*, will surely find it much more difficult to disrupt established readerships. If, like *Today*, it has to surrender its principles to survive, then there will have been little point in starting it at all. Given the present state of the British newspaper market, one thing is clear: it's far tougher at the bottom than the top. •

Bob Woffinden