

Breaking News: The Remaking of Journalism and Why It Matters Now.

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As editor of the *Guardian* for two full decades, starting in 1995 just as the World Wide Web began spinning, Alan Rusbridger had a hand on the tiller as news media struggled to navigate turbulent waters. Now an academic at Oxford, he provides a firsthand account of those stormy years in his book *Breaking News*, which helps to fill a notable gap to date in histories of this important epoch. As Rusbridger notes, there seem to have been “few attempts to describe what it felt like from the inside.” His leadership of the liberal newspaper, which morphed from a local Manchester daily into a U.K. national in 1961, was key to it morphing again in the 21st century into a leading global news brand thanks to the Internet. A self-confessed gadget freak, Rusbridger was no doubt the right editor at the right time for the *Guardian*. He saw the possibilities brought by the web’s reach and expanded first into the United States and then to Australia, with the help of digital visionaries such as Emily Bell, who is now at Columbia. Their guiding principle, aside from the progressive editorial policy of long-time editor C.P. Scott, was keeping the *Guardian*’s journalism free for all to read online. Their mantra was “reach before revenue,” except that online revenue never grew enough to offset the losses in print advertising and circulation.

After the recession of 2008–2009 accelerated the decline in print advertising, the *Guardian* had to increasingly dip into the rich trust fund Scott left to subsidize it. But the Scott Trust was falling in value as its investments declined with the recession, so the *Guardian* had to cut back on its journalism and make layoffs. Luckily it hit on an innovative solution, turning to its readers for more revenues. Many other newspapers did the same, but the *Guardian*’s approach was different. Rather than putting up a paywall and charging for online access, it kept its content free and simply asked its readers to contribute voluntarily, an idea which Rusbridger credits to NYU professor Clay Shirky. They responded in the hundreds of thousands after Rusbridger left by either taking out memberships or making one-time contributions, all but assuring the *Guardian*’s future.

During his time as editor, the *Guardian* broke some of the biggest international news stories, including the WikiLeaks document dump in 2010 and Edward Snowden’s privacy revelations in 2013. But by far the biggest U.K. story it uncovered was the 2011 phone hacking scandal. That resulted in the Leveson inquiry, which recommended the establishment of an independent regulator with some teeth, unlike the existing Press Complaints Commission, which was roundly derided as a “publisher’s

poodle.” The most interesting story Rusbridger tells in *Breaking News* is how Fleet Street responded to the notion of regulation. He was one of 19 editors who met over breakfast and unanimously endorsed 40 of Leveson’s 47 recommendations, including an independent regulator with independent funding. “There was a sense of relief that we had got off lightly,” recalled Rusbridger. But then began the “long, arduous, bitter” fightback from higher-ups he describes only as “the elders.” First, there was a delay in circulating the meeting’s minutes. *Times* editor James Harding, who had chaired the meeting, explained that one of the editors was having second thoughts. Then Harding was “coincidentally” sacked.

Newspapers began to denounce the Leveson proposals as state control after 300 years of press freedom. Instead of signing up to an independent press regulator, the elders decided to set up their own body and call it independent. Thus was born the press-funded Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO). One elder invited him to tea, Rusbridger recalled, and

produced some sheets of paper from his inside pocket. This was how it was going to be . . . I said I’d go away and think about it. My teatime companion’s mood darkened. His blunt advice was not to think about it too long. If you don’t do what we want then I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes. (Emphasis in original)

In the end, the *Guardian* did not join IPSO, nor did the *Financial Times* or the now-online *Independent*. Rusbridger joined Oxford after stepping down as *Guardian* editor in 2015, but he was not appointed chair of the Scott Trust as planned in 2016 after the *Times* reported that *Guardian* staff were “furious” he might return (Rigby, 2016). According to the *Times*, they blamed Rusbridger for pending job cuts necessitated by the paper’s global expansion. He was, however, appointed chair of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford in 2016.

Breaking News is a fascinating tale expertly told and well worth a read for anyone interested in the hothouse politics of the erstwhile Fleet Street press, not to mention the technological changes which have roiled the newspaper industry for the past quarter century.

Reference

Rigby, E. (2016, April 20). Guardian staff furious as Rusbridger set to return. *The Times*. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/guardian-staff-fury-at-rusbridger-return-rg7rmb5r>