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THE UK NATIONAL PRESS TODAY

We have in Britain the greatest variety of newspapers of any nation in the world, and that is particularly true of our national press. But what do we mean by 'national press'? In these days of devolved government, the *Scotsman* or *Herald* may see themselves as the national newspapers of Scotland, and the *Western Mail* has claimed to be the national paper of Wales. Therefore, to define the national press as those newspapers published in London and readily available across the UK could be seen as provocative; however, it remains a useful and commonly accepted description, and will be used throughout this book.

The fact that we have a thriving national press is due to several factors. London is the capital and the home of parliament, government departments, the senior courts, the royal family, financial institutions and the headquarters of many of our leading companies. It is, in short, the main centre of power. It is thus the source of most news of the institutional variety, from prime minister's questions to company annual general meetings, from major trials and appeals to state occasions and cultural events such as film premiers and theatre first nights. It is inevitable, then, that a press which seeks to engage a national audience will be based in the nation's capital. That is true of journalistic activity, but no longer necessarily of the production aspects of the newspaper industry.

London is also the transport hub of the country and historically that has been a major factor in the development of a national press. The growth of a rail network during the nineteenth century, radiating out of London terminal stations, provided the perfect basis for speedy nationwide distribution of newspapers from London. In the context of a small and highly populated country the ability to provide newspapers full of national and international news, printed late at night, on breakfast tables the length and breadth of the country the next morning allowed the national press to develop rapidly. Distribution by rail continued until the 1980s. The great London railway stations were scenes of great activity every night and into the early hours of

the morning as bundles of freshly printed papers were carried from vans to trains with special provision for this cargo and sent to onward distribution points all over the land. Costs, rail cuts, the development of facsimile transmission of newspaper pages to satellite print works and the growth of the motorway network eventually moved distribution on to the roads, but rail had dominated for 100 years.

All this, and perhaps a culture of nationalism rather than regionalism, led to the dominant influence of a national press in a way that never happened in other European countries or the United States, where, for reasons of the size of the country and the impossibility of overnight distribution, a tradition of big city and regional newspapers developed.

Like other national presses the British press is highly idiosyncratic. The British press is an extreme case within Europe in the extent to which it is dominated by national newspapers published in one city. The leading publications are all London daily newspapers (and their even more idiosyncratic Sunday stable companions). Because they are so competitive, these newspapers have none of those inhibitions which semi-monopoly generates elsewhere. The London newspapers are less restrained than the leading newspapers of most other countries; they are all public companies, open to public and financial scrutiny. Their senior people are willing to be interviewed. As an extreme example of a press which is *national*, which is *competitive*, and which is a *newspaper* press, the British national press provides a case study of newspaper power which may be of some wider significance. (Tunstall, 1996: 2)

Britain's newspaper market place is highly stratified, although not as much as it was, and is influenced by class (or socio-economic group), education, occupation and self-image. We refer to the 'tabloids', meaning the redtops, the *Sun*, *Mirror* and *Star*, not the 'serious' tabloids like the *Independent* and *Times*, which refer to themselves as compacts. We talk of the 'mid-market', meaning the *Mail* and *Express*, and to the 'serious', 'quality' or 'broadsheet' market – the *Telegraph*, *Times*, *Guardian*, *Independent* and *Financial Times* – despite the fact that three of the broadsheets are now smaller format. Sale generally diminishes as we work up these three tiers, although the *Mail's* circulation breaks this rule.

The stratification is the same on Sundays, with the same publishers occupying the same areas of the market. So in the redtop tabloid sector we have the *Sunday Mirror* and *People* published by Trinity Mirror (publisher of the *Daily Mirror*), News International's *News of the World* as stable-mate to the *Sun*, and the *Daily Star Sunday* (Express group). In the mid-market we have the *Mail on Sunday* and *Sunday Express*, sharing publishers with the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express* respectively. And at the quality end we have the two 'compacts', *Observer* and *Independent on Sunday*, published in the same formats by the same owners, of the *Guardian* and *Independent* respectively, and

Table 2.1 Sales of national dailies in 000s – Sept. of year in question

Title	1977	1987	1997	2004	2008
<i>Telegraph</i>	1,327	1,186	1,130	901	851
<i>Times</i>	287	450	815	661	638
<i>Financial Times</i>	178	308	327	438	429
<i>Guardian</i>	267	473	428	376	349
<i>Independent</i>	n/a	360	288	265	220
<i>Daily Mail</i>	1,881	1,810	2,344	2,443	2,242
<i>Daily Express</i>	5,310	1,700	1,241	960	739
<i>Sun</i>	3,944	4,140	3,887	3,336	3,155
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	3,986	3,096	2,442	1,794	1,441
<i>Daily Star</i>	n/a	1,159	632	900	731

n/a = not applicable (i.e. yet to launch)

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations

Table 2.2 Sales of national Sundays in 000s – Sept. of year in question

Title	1977	1987	1997	2004	2008
<i>Sunday Times</i>	1,342	1,277	1,449	1,370	1,221
<i>Sunday Telegraph</i>	847	758	938	702	622
<i>Observer</i>	700	766	498	462	453
<i>Independent on Sunday</i>	n/a	n/a	311	214	183
<i>Mail on Sunday</i>	n/a	1,834	2,322	2,338	2,239
<i>Sunday Express</i>	3,167	2,251	1,262	1,004	655
<i>News of the World</i>	4,990	5,191	4,620	3,889	3,242
<i>Sunday Mirror</i>	4,027	2,999	2,424	1,584	1,316
<i>People</i>	4,052	2,961	2,002	1,013	626
<i>Daily Star Sunday</i>	n/a	n/a	n/a	485	382

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulations

n/a = not applicable (i.e. yet to launch)

two broadsheets, *Sunday Times* and *Sunday Telegraph*, stable-mates of the daily *Times* and *Telegraph*. Rupert Murdoch's News International (redtop and quality) and Richard Desmond's Express group (redtop and mid-market) are the only publishers to have a presence in two of the three market sectors for both dailies and Sundays.

Tables 2.1 and 2.2 show sales of the national newspaper titles (daily and Sunday) over the past 30 years.

The redtop tabloids

Traditionally the redtop tabloids have been the most popular newspapers, targeted first at the working man, now more broadly at readers of both sexes from the lower socio-economic groups. Once referred to as the 'picture papers' because of the predominance of pictures over words – emphasised by the small format – they gave much space to sport, particularly football and horse-racing, the sports favoured by the working class for their links with betting. They featured show business (in the days before 'celebrity'), 'people' stories rather than politics, issues and foreign affairs.

Essentially redtop tabloids are about 'fun', a word encountered frequently by Sofia Johansson (2008) in her study of what attracted *Mirror* and *Sun* readers to their newspapers. She was told (2008: 404) 'it's a fun newspaper to read' and found 'this was a primary reason for buying the papers, with central experiences of amusement'. This study described the tabloids as having 'a typically sensationalist news style, a celebrity oriented and sexualised news agenda and the use of aggressive journalistic methods such as paparazzi coverage and chequebook journalism' (2008: 402).

This enjoyment factor in the popularity of redtop tabloids is stressed by Johansson's research sample. 'Sport and celebrity gossip dominated discussions of particularly well-liked reading material' (2008: 405). The papers provided 'a way to cope with experiences of events and circumstances of the surrounding world as threatening or depressing, where the newspapers would have a cheering-up function'. The emphasis on fun can be understood as 'a response to day-to-day routines, where the newspaper reading can work both as a way to release unwanted emotions and as dealing with general anxieties' (407).

It is all told in a language driven by its accessibility, its readability. It became known as 'tabloidese'. Martin Conboy (2006: 14) describes 'this systematic language use as rhetoric, not a high-flown, abstract style but a set of language devices used with the deliberate and consistent aim of confirming the existence of a national tabloid readership'. He quotes Teun Van Dijk (1991: 47) describing it as a 'range of language deployed by the tabloids to effectively inscribe a readership within its pages through the use of metaphor, irony, alliteration, rhyme or parallelism'.

Keith Waterhouse (1989: 26–27), now a *Daily Mail* columnist but for very many years a star of the then hugely successful *Daily Mirror*, described how in the mid-1930s that paper

spat the plum from its mouth and began to speak in its own down-to-earth voice. ... The *Daily Mirror* ceased to be fuddy-duddy and became brash and cheeky. Sometimes, it has to be said with hindsight, the paper's efforts to be bright and breezy had all the desperation of a fixed smile, and on occasion, anticipating the antics of today's tabloids, it could be so trivial as to appear featherbrained.

That style, refined and adapted by the Murdoch *Sun*, still defines the redtop, using short words and sentences, nouns as adjectives and expressions seldom spoken by anyone at all to provide the quick read the redtops believe their readers require.

As Jeremy Tunstall puts it:

These daily papers focus on light news, the entertaining touch, and human interest; this in practice means focusing on crime, sex, sport, television, showbusiness, and sensational human interest stories. There is an overwhelming emphasis on personalities; such 'serious' news as is covered is often presented via one personality attacking another personality. Much material in these papers is 'look-at' material – there are many pictures, big headlines, and the advertising is mainly display, which again involves pictures and big headlines. The remainder of the tabloid is 'quick read' material with most stories running to less than 400 words. (1996: 11)

Although that broad Tunstall description of the redtop tabloids holds today, the papers have moved downmarket – 'dumbed down' (Johansson, 2008: 402) – and the environment in which they are published has changed. But they still provide a 'community' of readers, who enjoy discussing the trivia they read in the redtops. 'Tabloid reading was without exception described as a social activity' and was 'connotative of the warmth of human interaction, or belongingness and security' (409, 410).

The tabloids still sell in large quantities (the *Sun* sells ten times as many copies each day as the *Guardian*, for example) but they are losing sale faster than any other sector of the market. Over the past 20 years the *Sun* and *Mirror* between them have suffered sales losses of one third, or nearly 2.5 million. On Sundays the decline is significantly greater. The *News of the World*, *Sunday Mirror* and *People* have lost nearly half their combined sales over the same period, around 5.5 million. The rate of decline has increased over the past decade. So the popular press has become less popular, and the relative success of the *Mail* titles, to which we will come with the mid-market, has challenged the terminology.

The figures for individual titles over the past 20 years are stark: *Sun* sales down from 3.9 million to 3.1 million; *Mirror* down from 3.2 million to 1.6 million; *News of the World* down from 5.0 million to 3.3 million; *Sunday Mirror* down from 3.0 million to 1.5 million; and, most spectacularly, the *People* down from 2.9 million to 0.7 million (all figures audited ABC). So why the biggest decline in the most popular sector of the market? In order to answer this more specific question we will ignore the more general factors which apply to all newspapers, particularly the growth of alternative sources of news and information, and the variety of media on which they are available. Those who believe that the printed press has 'dumbed down' over the last 20 years argue that this has been done for commercial reasons,

that so-called quality has been traded for greater commercial success. In the case of popular newspapers this 'lowest common denominator' or 'pandering to the masses' argument only works if it brings the desired result. If we are talking about the mass sector of the newspaper market, then it has clearly failed. The tabloid sector has always targeted the mass market, always sought to be 'popular'. Tunstall argues that 'the full tabloidisation of both downmarket and mid-market British national newspapers was not completed until the 1980s' (1996: 9), but diminishing popularity of the 'downmarket' part of that has been under way since then.

In the heyday of the *Daily Mirror*, the 1950s and 1960s, it was certainly a more upmarket product than it is today. In a period when class was a more clear-cut aspect of British society the *Mirror's* brilliance was to be able to inform comprehensibly and mostly without patronising while at the same time entertaining. It rarely talked down to its working-class readership, while accepting that what we would now call their lifestyle, both work and leisure, was distinctive and definable. The *Mirror* dealt with politics and work-related issues. It was the friend of organised labour, up to a point, and of crowded football terraces where everybody stood. It drank in the public bar, not the saloon. It celebrated manual labour and holidays in British seaside resorts. And it recognised, as many then didn't, that intelligence and reflection were not matters of social position.

But then the social order began to change, youth culture became a recognisable condition that crossed traditional class boundaries, as did political affiliation, and the erosion of deference meant the erosion of distinct and separate agendas for the different sectors of the newspaper market. And in 1969 Rupert Murdoch bought the *News of the World* and the *Sun*. The latter was re-launched to compete head-on with, and defeat, the *Mirror*. The *Sun's* early, and hugely successful, editors, Larry Lamb and Kelvin MacKenzie, did not share the *Mirror's* aspirational view of the working man and his thirst for education but preferred to cater to his perceived (by the *Sun*) tastes for naked breasts, sexual innuendo (and activity), soap operas, military adventures and package holidays to Spain, and his distaste for scroungers, strikers, comers-in and 'toffs'. The initial sales figures suggested they had the right formula. They caught the pre-Thatcher mood and grew in confidence through most of the Thatcher years. It was done with style and wit. The *Mirror*, helped by the catastrophic ownership of Robert Maxwell, was left standing.

But it was a re-interpretation of the old formula, and a more pessimistic view of its audience, the *Sun* was exploiting, and it failed to take into account how the old order was changing. It failed to recognise that Thatcherism had destroyed working-class solidarity by making it aspirational, that owner-occupation and the decline of traditional working-class manual employment was expanding the middle class and the numbers who sought to join it or

believed they had. Why else was the *Mail* gaining readers while the redtops were losing them? These newspapers for the masses took the soft route of following television, reporting twists in soap opera plots as though they were fact not fiction, and turning soap actors, not to mention page three girls, into celebrities. They created a new aristocracy out of footballers and their wives. The *Daily Star* launched on the basis that if the *Sun* had prospered by going downmarket of the *Mirror* they could achieve the same by going downmarket of the *Sun*. They made their glamour pictures more soft porn and took the television symbiosis a stage further by devoting pages every day to 'coverage' of reality TV shows, particularly *Big Brother*. The *Mirror* lost its roots and the *Sun* never had any. They partied instead. They sent 3.00 a.m. girls to party with, and report, the celebrities they had created, and their editors became celebrities in their own right. Kelvin MacKenzie, and then the new *Mirror* editor, *Sun*-trained Piers Morgan, encouraged by the fascination for the tabloids shown by editors of more serious newspapers, started to enjoy sharing the status, and the parties, their creations lived for. Having removed themselves, and their newspapers, from the everyday lives of their readers, they depended on the voyeurism of these readers, their absorption in the vacuous lives of rich and famous-for-very-little.

Those who were entranced by celebrities had other places to go, magazines whose raison d'être was reporting and sustaining the B-list. Magazines can handle fads – they can be closed when the fad passes, and new ones take their place. But newspapers, in whichever market sector they are located, need a soul, to stand for something. The danger for the redtops is that focussing only on ephemera runs the risk of making them ephemeral themselves. The circulation decline of the redtops suggests they are running that risk.

The Sunday tabloids, historically more racey than their daily counterparts, have suffered more. The *News of the World*, still the biggest-selling paper in the country, continues to investigate and has the journalistic talent to do it well, but too often the subjects are of too little consequence to merit the effort. Investigation in the celebrity era too often comes down to investigating celebrity infidelity, paid-for kiss and tell accounts by the dumped or the bedroom performance of the dumpers. There is a curiously old-fashioned tone to the shock (however hypocritical) expressed by the redtops at the morality of those they 'expose'. It may have worked in the days when they were amplifying the evidence delivered in salacious court cases, when public morality led to tut-tutting while enjoying the read. Today it is hard to believe that many are shocked, or much care, particularly when they know cuckolded minor celebrities are touting their stories for money.

Away from the bedroom, investigations are too often contrived: the agent provocateur activities of the *News of the World*'s 'fake sheikh', the illegal bugging, the repetitive 'exposing' of security flaws by sending reporters with fake weapons through airports. In an age of real terrorist fears and real security

the public-interest justification by the redtops for soft investigations no longer rouses the readers.

The *Mirror* made one attempt to put the clock back. Long after Maxwell, long after the *Sun's* circulation lead looked irrecoverable, Piers Morgan, supported by Philip Graf, chief executive of the new owners, Trinity Mirror, decided he was sick of *Big Brother*, celebrity, kiss and tell and wanted to return the *Mirror* to its former self. Leave aside his own massive contribution to the promotion of celebrity journalism, and his television programme in which he interviewed celebrities about what it was like to be the subject of celebrity journalism, Morgan was characteristically determined about his reinvention of himself and his newspaper.

At the 2001 Belfast conference of the Society of Editors Morgan publicly renounced '*Big Brother* journalism'. The events of 9/11, he said, had redefined tabloid journalism. He recounted his Belfast speech in his volume of 'diaries':

We all saw big sales increases through July and August thanks to *Big Brother*, the most inane television ever made. I remember sitting in my office one night as bidding for interviews with various occupants of the *BB* house reached ridiculous proportions, thinking: has it really come to this? Is my journalistic career going to depend on whether I can persuade some halfwit from Wales called Helen to take my company's £250,000 and reveal in sizzlingly tedious detail that she's even more stupid than we first feared? (2005: 302)

He said that he had detected a new hunger for serious news that had at first been driven by fear after 9/11 but was now born out of serious interest. Morgan recalled the words of a former *Mirror* editor, Sylvester Bolam: 'The *Mirror's* a sensational paper, but sensationalism doesn't mean the distortion of the truth. It means the vivid and dramatic presentation of events so as to give them a forceful impact on the mind of the reader' (2005: 302). 'I genuinely believe we're on to something here,' said Morgan, and went on to change his paper radically. This meant serious content written by serious journalists. John Pilger, veteran *Mirror* man, was one who returned and the paper adopted a strongly anti-Iraq war stance, as well as a black title-piece rather than the former redtop. Celebrity gossip was out. Just 18 months later Morgan was sending a *mea culpa* email to his chief executive Sly Bailey (Graf had gone, a casualty of the *Mirror's* decline) after monthly sales figures had, as he put it, 'fallen off a cliff'. He had misjudged the way many *Mirror* readers would respond to the start of the war, with his paper attacking the war while the sons of his readers were under enemy attack in Iraq.

Maybe it was the latter point rather than the new seriousness of the paper, the issue rather than the philosophy. Whichever, it hardly sent out signals that changing direction was the route to recovery. The *Sun* increased the circulation gap, and has continued to do so. And it was Iraq that brought

about the downfall of Morgan. He had printed pictures allegedly taken in Basra of British soldiers allegedly abusing Iraqi civilians. There were questions over the authenticity of the pictures, and a huge row involving the government, the army and the *Mirror*. It was the beginning of the end for Morgan, and soon after he was sacked (Morgan, 2005: 1–12). The *Mirror* returned to competing with the *Sun* on its own ground; and the redtop tabloid market continued to decline.

The mid-market

The mid-market revival is the story of one newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, and its Sunday sibling the *Mail on Sunday*. The two have overturned the natural order of the newspaper market, where redtop tabloids sell more than mid-market papers, which in turn sell more than the serious or ‘quality’ papers. The *Daily Mail* today is the second largest-selling daily newspaper in Britain (to the *Sun*); the *Mail on Sunday* is the second largest-selling Sunday newspaper (to the *News of the World*). Both sell on average more than 2.3 million copies each publication day (audited ABC sales).

The *Mail* was founded in 1896 by Alfred Harmsworth, and unlike any other national newspaper (with the exception of the *Guardian*, which has a different structure being owned by a trust) has enjoyed the same ownership ever since. Associated Newspapers, the company running the Mail group, is headed today by the latest Lord Rothermere, and the family has never deviated from its support for its newspapers. They have had a chequered history, but the modern good times really started in the early 1970s when the company ended its involvement in the redtop tabloid market by closing the failing *Daily Sketch* and relaunching the broadsheet *Mail* as a mid-market tabloid. It started the *Mail on Sunday* in 1982. It owes the success of both newspapers to the journalistic flair and talent of David English, who became editor-in-chief, and after his death his successor Paul Dacre, the present editor-in-chief. These two editorial giants have led the *Mail* titles not only to complete dominance of their market sector but to an influence and regard across the national newspaper market. They are loathed by their liberal critics. *Guardian* columnists and leader writers regularly disparage the *Mail* and what it stands for, while the *Mail* regularly responds with disparaging comments about the *Guardian*. Since the overlap of readers is nearly non-existent, it is an ‘insider’ battle fought out in the public prints often to the bafflement of readers of one or the other newspaper.

The extreme end of liberal contempt for the *Mail* was articulated by Nick Davies (2008) in his wider assault on the current state of newspaper journalism, *Flat Earth News*. He finds the *Mail* ‘guilty of a certain kind of reporting. This involves something rather like the work of a gardener, who digs out and

throws away weeds and stones and anything else which he does not want and then plants whatever he fancies. The story, in other words, is a model of the subtle art of distortion. Aggressive distortion' (2008: 357).

Nevertheless, the *Mail* is taken immensely seriously by politicians across the spectrum as representing a hugely significant and unignorable strand of British public opinion. The *Mail* titles exude confidence. The daily, with its longer history, sets the agenda, which is based on an intimate knowledge of its audience. The *Mail* is the embodiment of the idea that a successful newspaper both reflects and reinforces the prejudices of its readers. It believes it knows what these are, more than the politicians who seek their votes. The *Mail* is suspicious of what it sees as the metropolitan liberal consensus of the 'political and media classes'. It regards this as out of touch with 'ordinary voters', by which it means *Mail* readers. It despises political correctness and what Dacre refers to as the 'subsidiariat'. Delivering the Cudlipp Lecture at the London College of Communication in January 2007, Dacre described this as the loss-making newspapers, those 'subsidised' by the profits of other publications in their group (he cited the *Sun* 'subsidising' the *Times* and *Auto Trader* 'subsidising' the *Guardian*) and the taxpayer 'subsidising' the BBC. He said of the loss-making newspapers:

Their journalism and values invariably liberal, metropolitan and politically correct, don't connect with sufficient readers to be commercially viable. Ah, say the bien pensants, but such papers are hugely concerned for the common good. But there is a rather unedifying contradiction here. For the subsidiariat are actually rather disdainful of the common man, contemptuous even, of the papers that make profits by appealing to and connecting with millions of ordinary men and women.

That, in a nutshell, is the credo of the dominant influence on the *Mail*. It is articulated daily in a set of values that can be summarised thus: it espouses self-reliance and eschews dependency – it is for standing on your own feet, suspicious of welfare and relentless in 'exposing' cases of welfare abuse, or 'scrounging'. It is more concerned about crime than the causes of crime, and prefers what it calls 'traditional' values to 'liberal' values. That means a belief in marriage and family life, and concern about working mothers. It campaigns against bureaucratic interference, or 'meddling', and celebrates achievement above equality of opportunity. It takes a negative line on the European Union, the BBC and the 'nanny state'. At the same time it campaigns, more vigorously and bravely than others, for justice for Stephen Lawrence and a range of 'victims' – pensioners, teachers wrongly accused of misconduct against pupils, employers wrongly accused of discrimination.

Unlike the redtop tabloids the *Mail* cannot be accused of ignoring serious news. It is a tabloid that puts the emphasis on text and is never afraid to run long stories over more than a page. It invests heavily in editorial content and

promotion and has more long-serving distinguished journalists than any other paper. It is ruthlessly edited, commissioning far more material than it publishes, and it projects its columnists whom it hires to project its prejudices in a more extreme form than represented in its leaders. The *Mail* likes to give space to a rant. It has a strong record of exposure stories that frequently make waves and influence or even set the political agenda. At the same time it has led the way on lifestyle features, particularly in the area of health. It has the highest proportion of women readers of any national newspaper. While the mass-selling redtops have failed to recognise changes in British society, the *Mail* has embraced them, identifying the growing middle class as its target audience and understanding that many of them do not subscribe to liberal values. It is often portrayed as the voice of 'middle England', of the 'silent majority'. Its success suggests that this constituency exists.

In his Cudlipp Lecture Dacre took on those of the 'liberal establishment' who sought to curb the excesses of the press, who argued that the 'irresponsibility of Britain's media was making good governance all but impossible' and that 'more civic journalism' was needed. He said:

This argument, while being a brilliant defence of such newspapers as *Pravda*, profoundly misunderstands the nature of Britain's popular press. Such papers need to be sensational, irreverent, gossipy, interested in celebrities and human relationships and, above all, brilliantly entertaining sugar coated pills if they are to attract huge circulations and devote considerable space to intelligent, thought provoking journalism, analysis and comment on important issues. And any paper that manages both to entertain and engage millions of readers with brilliantly written serious journalism on the great issues of the day is playing an important role in democracy and the judges and the subsidariat ignore the sugar coated pill argument at their peril.

Of course the British press, pretty much all of it, has flaws: under pressure of deadlines it is, regrettably, too often careless, too often insensitive and clumsy in its headlong rush for a story, it over-states and over-simplifies, it prefers the dramatic to the mundane, the sentimental to the compassionate. Above all it lives for the day and is often risibly short term in its view of things.

But I also believe passionately that the popular press has great virtues. At their best, popular papers – that are far more sensitive than politicians and opinion polls to national moods – articulate the anxieties, apprehensions and aspirations of their readers. Genuinely democratic – I mean, you try persuading people to fork out 45p for a paper on a rainy day – they give voice to millions of ordinary people who don't have a voice.

And because they have this symbiotic, almost tactile responsiveness to their readers, such papers are often able to identify and highlight great truths – truths that are often uncomfortable to a ruling class that is increasingly dismissive of ordinary people's views. (Dacre, 2007)

The *Daily Express* notoriously was dismissive of its readers' views when it was owned by the TV mogul and New Labour peer Clive Hollick. The

Express, the creature of one of the most famous of all proprietors, Lord Beaverbrook (see Chapter 4), which had dominated the market from the 1930s to the 1960s, when it entered its period of decline, which continues and is unlikely ever to be reversed. In the golden days it too knew its audience and its times, deeply patriotic, royalist, conservative and imperial. It was selling over 4 million copies a day in 1955, and around three-quarters of a million today. It never really recovered from end of empire, consistently losing sales throughout the sixties and most years since. After it moved out of Beaverbrook ownership it went through a succession of proprietors, and changed its editor with the regularity of a football manager.

But it was Hollick, acquiring the paper in 1996, who defied every theory of running a successful newspaper by deciding to sack the readers. In its heyday the *Express* was the confident upholder of all things Conservative (capital C), and until Hollick bought the paper it remained staunchly right wing. Hollick decided it should overnight become New Labour, and brought in as editor Rosie Boycott to supervise the change. Suddenly the colonels from Cheltenham found themselves reading about the case for legalising marijuana over their toast and marmalade. They did not like it. Hollick had forgotten the first rule of newspapers, that it is so much easier to lose readers than to gain them. And when you tell all your readers that this is now a different newspaper of a wholly different political and social outlook, then it is likely they will depart. They did. The *Mail* gratefully took them in. Hollick sold to Richard Desmond, who had built his reputation and fortune publishing in the cellophane wrapped, top-shelf end of the magazine market. Then in 2004 the *Express* readers had another opportunity for confusion. The editor, Peter Hill, signed a front-page editorial explaining his 'historic decision' to return to normal service and 'back the Tories'. Sales continued to fall.

The new Tory *Express* developed a new kind of newspaper formula: identify a small number of stories that research shows interest the readers and always lead the front page with them, whether or not anything has happened. Initially it was house prices, mortgage rates and inheritance tax. Then they seized on Princess Diana and turned the conspiracy theory into an art form. Day after day they led the paper on new twists in the already very old story, using seldom identified 'sources' to back up increasingly unlikely 'news' stories about the circumstances of Diana's death. Day after day these stories sank without trace, but it never deterred the paper from coming up with more. In 2007, while never suspending its commitment to the Diana conspiracy, it adopted a similarly obsessive approach to the abduction of Madeleine McCann. Of course this was a story that had absorbed the British public for many weeks after the disappearance in Portugal of the child, and there had been saturation coverage from all the media. But the *Express* continued to lead the paper day after day, under the label in red type 'Madeleine',

with tenuous stories seldom appearing anywhere else. In March 2008 the *Express* (together with the sister *Daily Star* and the two papers' Sunday stable mates) were forced to publish prominent apologies and pay substantial damages to Madeleine's parents, Gerry and Kate. Today the paper, which has had editorial costs stripped out to leave a much smaller staff than its competitors, is much diminished in reputation, as well as sale.

The *Mail* – 'brilliant and corrupt, the professional foul of contemporary Fleet Street' (Davies, 2008: 369) – is always controversial, always talked about by journalists and politicians. But the mid-market is now *Mail* (loved and loathed) territory, weekdays and Sunday, and these papers attract upwardly mobile readers from the redtop sector as well as competing with right-of-centre titles in the quality sector.

The serious or 'quality' sector

No longer can we call them the broadsheets, because three of them aren't. The so-called 'compact revolution' is dealt with in detail later in this chapter, because it has been a significant development and has contributed to the relative success of the upmarket sector during the recent years of newspaper circulation decline. It is the sector that has undergone the most change, not only in format but in editorial content, bulk and in driving multi-media publishing. It is the sector that features most often in the 'dumbing down' debate (see Chapter 6) because occupying the higher, more serious, more issue-driven ground, it has more potential for descent and its natural readers tend to occupy the higher socio-economic and intellectual area of society, and include the politicians and decision takers, those who run society. The serious newspapers, traditionally strong on text and debate, less interested in human interest, tittle-tattle and popular culture, have a presence and influence way beyond their relatively modest circulations.

The five serious dailies – *Times*, *Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Independent* and *Financial Times* – account for (at the end of 2008) an average 2.48 million sales (audited ABC), fewer than the *Sun* alone and just 0.4 million more than the *Daily Mail*. The four serious Sundays – *Sunday Times*, *Sunday Telegraph*, *Observer* and *Independent on Sunday* – have combined sales of 2.48 million, fewer than the *News of the World* alone and only 0.27 million more than the *Mail on Sunday*. Competition and profitability, however, are not simply about sales; they are about sales to whom. Revenues from popular, mass-circulation newspapers come predominantly from cover price, whereas the serious newspapers, which sell at a higher price, are much more dependent on advertising revenue, for which they can charge higher rates because of the higher socio-economic status, and affluence, of their readers.

As Tunstall (1996: 14) puts it:

In terms of commercial income, upmarket papers are primarily in the advertising business, while downmarket papers are primarily in the sales business. Upmarket papers must sell to upmarket people, for whom they can charge high advertising rates per thousand readers. These contrasted forms of revenue, it can be said, exaggerate the real differences between their two sets of readers. But there is also a further form of polarisation or exaggeration; while downmarket readers simply focus on selling more copies (thus maximising sales revenue), the upmarket papers tend to focus upon the more affluent (and more attractive to advertisers) readers even within their middle-class audience.

It thus becomes highly significant that the popular newspapers are losing sales (on which they are more dependent) faster than the serious titles. And it goes some way to explaining why the serious titles have been earlier and more enthusiastic adopters of web publishing, in that they are more concerned, have more to lose, from a shift of advertising from print to online, and have a readership which is more active online.

The *Financial Times*, the pink one, needs to be distinguished from the other serious titles. It is basically a specialist business newspaper, seeing its natural rival as the *Wall Street Journal* (acquired in 2008 by Rupert Murdoch), and it has an international audience, publishing in the United States and the Far East as well as in London. It has a large institutional sale, with a heavy presence in boardrooms and financial institutions. Its audited sale, always included in the monthly ABC data, and thus compared with the other serious papers, is, however, very different in character. Its sale of 452,000 (Oct. 2008) includes 297,000 (66 per cent) outside the UK and Ireland. The *Times*, in contrast, sells 29,000 of its 630,000 circulation (5 per cent) overseas. The other qualities show roughly similar proportions to the *Times*.

However, in recent years the *FT* has enjoyed great circulation growth and has added to its general content while in no way diluting its business and finance base. It is highly regarded for its political and international coverage, and for its commentary. It has developed its website into one of the strongest. Although it does not have a Sunday sibling it produces a Saturday edition which is distinctively different, and has more general appeal, from its Monday to Friday product, and this is on sale on Saturdays and Sundays, making it Britain's one declaredly 'weekend' newspaper.

The four general serious dailies and their four sibling Sundays have readerships that are 80 per cent ABC1 (the professional and managerial classes) and 50 per cent AB (the senior members of those classes). They are educated, affluent (to varying degrees), cultivated (ditto) and influential. They span the mainstream political spectrum, with the *Independent* and *Guardian* left of centre (the *Independent* more agitprop, the *Guardian* more social democrat) and the *Times* and *Telegraph* to the right. This is reflected in the

Sunday publications, although the *Observer*, the *Guardian's* stable-mate, will take a rather different line from the daily on certain issues, most notably the Iraq war. The *Sunday Times* tends to be more vigorously right-wing than the daily, and has a very different character. All but the *Telegraph* titles, *Sunday Times* and *Financial Times* have changed to the compact format (see later in this chapter). Despite that maintenance of the status quo the *Telegraph* has in almost every other way been through massive change – new owners, new editors for daily and Sunday, new offices and a new and rapidly developing commitment to the digital age. The traditionally most conservative of newspapers, with its most conservative audience, is now offering readers pods, blogs and online TV, with constant cross referencing in the newspapers to its digital output.

All the serious newspapers have distinctive personalities, often caricatured, often used as a descriptor for a certain kind of person, defined by the newspaper he or she reads. The *Times* is probably the most famous British newspaper, known as the paper of the establishment, even, years ago, advertising itself as the 'top people's paper'. It was read by the political and professional classes, and carried the law reports. It had its famous letters' page, the establishment notice board, where the ruling elite aired their views and assumed, often rightly, note would be taken of them. Historically the *Times* was the 'newspaper of record'. It would provide the most comprehensive account of parliamentary debate, law reports and the activities of the royal family. It probably remains the most famous British newspaper across the world – the *Times* of London – despite being unrecognisable from its former self. Today, in common with the rest of the serious, quality press, it has a much more general, even populist, agenda. The change began when Rupert Murdoch bought it.

The *Telegraph*, the largest selling of the serious dailies, is traditionally the Conservative house journal, appealing to swathes of the traditional middle class across the country. If the *Times* was defined by its letters' page, the *Telegraph* was defined by its births, marriages and deaths columns. It seemed that no self-respecting member of the middle class would be born, betrothed, have children or die without these events being posted in the *Telegraph*. It sustained the congratulations and condolences shared, by post, among the readers. And to a certain extent it still does. *Telegraph* readers were not necessarily very successful or very rich, although a significant number were; they were above all respectable, professional, God-fearing people supporting what they considered to be traditional values. They tended to go to church, pay for education, drive Rovers and respect the upper and officer classes, or the 'natural order'. They did not like 'state interference'. They did like state occasions, field sports and Sunday lunchtime drinks parties. They sympathised with those unable to maintain their stately homes and country houses. Such people as still exist still read the *Telegraph*.

But this newspaper, like the *Times*, now has to appeal to a broader audience, or at least the sons and daughters of the traditional one, to Fulham as well as Gloucestershire.

It may have moved on from defence correspondents with a rank in their bylines, but it still gives a high priority to defence matters, recognising that commissioned officers still feature highly among the readership. It still debates problems associated with nannies and paying the school fees, and it still has its 'country life' agenda. But it is now more streetwise, even if that street is likely to be Sloane Square or Lombard Street. It assumes its readers would rather buy their chickens, pheasants or smoked salmon from expensive mail-order specialists rather than Marks and Spencer, and it recognises that the Rover has given way to a Range Rover. It knows that the readers are more likely to live in the city than the country, but assumes they own, or aspire to, a weekend place in the country. It believes its readers buy shares and worry about inheritance tax. And it maintains excellence in its sports coverage.

The *Guardian*, perhaps more than any other newspaper, is stereotyped by its critics and referred to satirically or derogatorily by its right-of-centre rivals. It is equally obsessed by other newspapers, particularly the *Daily Mail*. The *Guardian* used to be characterised as wearing open-toed sandals, and aimed at fell-walking social workers or teachers of woolly liberal persuasion. That dated back to its Manchester non-conformist roots, and the influence of its remarkably long-serving, bearded and bicycling editor C.P. Scott, who set up the trust that owns the paper, and the *Observer*, today. But the *Manchester Guardian* moved to London in the 1960s, dropped the Manchester, and gradually became the metropolitan liberal national newspaper it is today. Under its two wholly London editors, Peter Preston and Alan Rusbridger, it has taken on a new character and through its online product, Guardian Unlimited, established an international reputation. It has a relatively small circulation – only the *Independent's* is smaller – but a deeply committed and engaged readership of articulate, educated, mainly middle-class people. It takes itself very seriously, and so do its readers.

It still has a bedrock of public-sector readers, mainly teachers and social workers, for whom it provides supplements and from whom it has developed a profitable classified advertising business. It has also dominated the media jobs advertising market place, and runs a media news and comment section, and associated website, read avidly by media professionals. It speaks up for the Third World, for immigrants and ethnic minorities, the planet and climate change, for comprehensive education and for Europe. It is demanding of the Labour Party, to which it gives qualified support and which it frequently irritates. It sees itself at the cutting edge of metropolitan fad and fashion and ahead of the game in terms of culture, popular and high. It sometimes seems embarrassed by the affluence of its audience while at the same catering for those who eat in expensive restaurants and take exotic

holidays. It is often surprised that more people do not agree with it, or worse accuse it of hypocrisy. It agonises over those less fortunate than itself while appealing to a fashionable, liberal, London elite.

It does, however, provide a conscience for left-of-centre politics, and has a sound record for exposing inconsistency and sometimes corruption from those in power. It has influential columnists, a youthful second section, and it remains the preferred choice of the more earnest university student who still buys a (subsidised) newspaper.

The *Independent* achieved the near impossible by starting and continuing to exist. It was the brainchild of Andreas Whittam Smith and two *Telegraph* colleagues who had a dream of a new national newspaper not financed by one dominant proprietor or group. They raised money in relatively small tranches from venture capitalists and were able to claim true 'independence' when they launched into a booming and yuppie 1986. Although relatively conventional in appearance – it was a broadsheet then – it was innovative in content (it was the first paper to provide comprehensive listings and the first broadsheet to run large pictures) and became immediately fashionable. Its slogan 'It is. Are you?' – independent, that is – resonated at a time when the passions raised by Murdoch's move to Wapping were great. The marketing people used the word 'badge' – it enhanced the image of those seen carrying it. It sold more than 400,000 copies for a while, but then suffered from the economic downturn of the early nineties.

The ownership structure could not sustain it, and 'independence' gave way to corporate ownership, first by the *Mirror* and then by Tony O'Reilly's Independent News and Media. It has tried to maintain the values of its founders editorially if not in terms of ownership, but circulation continuously declined until the paper pioneered the reduction in size to the compact format (see later in this chapter). It is now declining again, with a circulation approaching half that in its heyday. A Sunday stable-mate was launched in 1990, the *Independent on Sunday*, again innovative with its well-designed Review. That paper too has suffered declining sales, more than the daily, and both titles are now bottom of the sales league in their respective markets.

Both are relatively under-resourced in terms of editorial staffing and budgeting, and neither makes a commercial case for existing. But O'Reilly finds them helpful to his profitable international portfolio, likes to own national newspapers in Britain, feels affection for them and supports them. Under the editorship-in-chief of Simon Kelner, who understands the need to compensate for lack of resource with distinctiveness and niche appeal, the *Independent* set off in a new direction when it adopted 'poster' front pages, dealing with a single issue and making no claim for impartiality. Kelner coined the term 'viewpaper' and saw that there was an (albeit limited) market for a paper that overtly campaigned, took a line, in its news coverage. It was consistent, and ahead of British public and newspaper opinion,

in its opposition to the war in Iraq, and possessed in Robert Fisk a reporter with attitude whose every word underpinned that stance. After embarking on the 'viewpaper' strategy the *Independent* sought other issues to take on with the poster treatment. It often seemed there were not enough, with the paper contriving an 'issue' for the front page poster treatment, rather than simply choosing the most important or interesting story of the day.

In 2008 Kelner moved from editor to managing director and brought in as his successor Roger Alton, who had previously edited the *Observer* with some circulation success. He took a more conventional approach to the front page and introduced a new sports supplement. He could not stem the circulation slide, but was hardly helped by a price rise to £1 (Monday to Friday) that made it the most expensive general interest daily. The *Independent* still has critical respect, but more affection than readers.

Who reads what? The demographics of newspaper audiences

The preceding sections on the three sectors of the national newspaper market have concentrated on the qualitative descriptions of the titles making up each sector, the audiences to which they cater and their success in this objective. A quantitative analysis of audience characteristics also helps to describe a newspaper, and marketing departments regularly collect data, both to tell the publisher about the audience the title has, and to identify those worth pursuing. This can lead to editorial developments, to the targeting of certain groups through particular content. It is of great interest to advertisers who are much more precise targeters than editors. The advertiser will base decisions on where to buy space on the demographics of the readers of the newspaper, and the likelihood of their being interested in buying the product or service being advertised. BMW does not advertise in the *Sun*.

The National Readership Survey continuously polls a representative sample of 35,000 people a year at the rate of 3,000 a month to provide first figures for the readership of papers (as opposed to sale, where ABC audits sales figures provided by the publishers) and then demographic data about those readers. It is an independent, non-profit organisation, and its methodology is agreed by both advertisers and publishers, both of whom take the results very seriously. The following tables tell us a lot about the typical readers of each title. The first four contain NRS data for the period April to September 2007.

Although women are in a majority of the adult population, most newspapers have a larger male readership than female. The one exception is the *Daily Mail*, as we have seen above the most commercially successful newspaper of the last 20 years. The *Mail* deliberately targets women in several ways. Its designated Femail and health sections appeal to women, as do the human interest, lifestyle and 'relationship' stories of which the *Mail* is so

Table 2.3 Newspaper readership by sex

Newspaper	Readership male %	Readership female %
All adults (15+)	48.6	51.4
Daily Telegraph	55.1	44.9
Financial Times	69.6	30.4
Guardian	57	43
Independent	60.9	39.1
Times	58.4	41.6
Daily Express	53.6	46.4
Daily Mail	48	52
Daily Mirror	53.1	46.9
Daily Star	69.1	30.9
Sun	57	43

Source: NRS 2007

Table 2.4 Newspaper readership by age

Newspaper	15-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Daily Telegraph	7.4	7.8	11.2	14.6	20.9	38.1
Financial Times	12.1	22.1	22.8	20.7	11.5	10.8
Guardian	11.1	16.2	25	19.6	15.3	12.7
Independent	15.2	18.9	19.2	22.8	12.7	11.2
Times	13.3	13.5	18.3	16.6	19.4	18.9
Daily Express	8.1	6.5	11.3	18	20.4	35.7
Daily Mail	9.2	6.9	14	17.1	21.7	31
Daily Mirror	14.5	12.5	13.8	16.8	15.8	26.6
Daily Star	21.1	21.2	23.6	14.9	12	7.2
Sun	19.9	17.8	19.2	14.8	13.6	14.6

Source: NRS 2007

fond. It is the newspaper most influenced by magazines in its approach to subject matter, presentation and narrative writing style. It uses magazine writers and makes extensive use of features. The *Daily Star* and *Financial Times* have the highest proportion of male readers, for entirely different reasons: soft porn in the *Star*, money in the *FT*. Of the redtops, the *Mirror* has the highest proportion of women readers.

Newspaper editors are always chasing young readers. The argument is that the sooner you get them the longer you have them, and that papers with an older readership lose them at a faster rate because they die. That theory depends on the loyalty of readers to stay with one title – 'We've always taken

Table 2.5 Newspaper readership by social grade

Newspaper	A	B	C1	C2	D	E
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	16.1	43.3	27.7	7.2	3.1	2.5
<i>Financial Times</i>	20.4	56.1	19.7	2.7	0.5	0.5
<i>Guardian</i>	13	49.9	28	3.2	3.3	2.5
<i>Independent</i>	11.2	45.4	33.4	6.2	2.8	0.9
<i>Times</i>	14.7	48.1	26.3	6.2	2.8	1.8
<i>Daily Express</i>	2.3	24	36.5	22.3	9.2	5.7
<i>Daily Mail</i>	5.2	26.6	34.2	19.4	10.4	4.2
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	1.2	10.5	28.5	29.5	21.5	8.6
<i>Daily Star</i>	0.3	6.8	21.5	32.1	29.4	9.9
<i>Sun</i>	0.8	9.8	25.5	30.9	22.9	10.1

Source: NRS 2007

the *Express* in our house' – and the assumption that young readers are attracted to newspapers at all. These assumptions are questionable, as is the belief by many advertisers that young people have more purchasing power and are more suggestible in terms of buying new products. Several factors counter that conventional view. Newspaper purchasing and reading habits have changed: even loyal readers of one title will buy it only on certain days ('occasional regular readers'); home delivery has declined massively; and more young readers than old are using the internet as their primary source of news. Increasing life expectancy means that there are more loyal older readers for longer, and the 'silver economy' is recognised as increasingly significant. So as long as older readers are replaced a perfectly viable newspaper market can exist at a time of changing demographics with an older age profile.

The successful *Daily Mail* has 70 per cent of its readers over the age of 45. The highest-selling title in the serious sector of the market, the *Daily Telegraph*, has 74 per cent. The *Guardian*, in contrast has 53 per cent of its readers under 45, as does the *Independent*. The *Sun* has an even spread of readers across all age groups, but only 43 per cent over 45 per cent. The *Daily Star* has the starkest profile: not only the highest proportion of male readers but the highest proportion of young readers, 38 per cent under 35 and 58 per cent under 45.

There is a clear class or socio-economic basis to UK newspaper readership, and the figures supporting this are of great relevance to advertisers who seek precision in targeting those most likely to buy their goods and services. The serious or 'quality' newspapers draw more than 60 per cent of their readers from the AB social grades, apart from the *Independent* with a figure of 57 per cent and the *Telegraph* with 59 per cent. The AB categories (26 per cent of adult population) include senior- and middle-management

Table 2.6 Newspaper readership by ethnic origin

Newspaper	White	Black	Indian subcontinent	Chinese/ other Asian	Other	All non-white
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	90.5	0.9	1.7	0.8	0.6	4.0
<i>Financial Times</i>	74.8	2.7	10.5	2.6	0.4	16.2
<i>Guardian</i>	81.3	4.9	1.9	3.3	1.4	11.5
<i>Independent</i>	83.7	3.9	2.9	2.3	2.6	11.7
<i>Times</i>	87.4	1.7	2.7	0.7	0.5	5.6
<i>Daily Express</i>	90.4	1.1	2.9	0.7	0.5	5.2
<i>Daily Mail</i>	89.5	1.2	2.3	1.3	0.6	5.4
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	84.5	5.7	3.9	1.2	1.1	11.9
<i>Daily Star</i>	92.4	2.5	2.5	0.7	0.8	6.5
<i>Sun</i>	88.3	3.4	2	1.1	1.1	7.6

Source: NRS 2007

professionals, from business, education, medicine, the civil service, law and the public sector. C1 (29 per cent) is the social grade describing all others doing non-manual jobs and manual jobs with specific qualifications. C2 (21 per cent) describes skilled manual workers, D (16 per cent) semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, and E (8 per cent) those with the lowest levels of income. (Descriptors used by Ipsos MORI). The *Sun*, *Mirror* and *Daily Star* all draw more than 60 per cent of their readers from the C2, D, and E social grades, the *Star* having the highest figure of 71 per cent. Again, the *Daily Mail* breaks through the usual market-sector barriers, with 65 per cent of its readers in the non-manual ABC1 categories, and 32 per cent in the top AB professional grouping. As it regularly points out, its substantial circulation in comparison with the serious sector of the market means it has more AB readers than all the quality titles.

The minority-ethnic population is about 13 per cent of the adult population as a whole, a figure that is not reflected in the minority-ethnic readership of most daily newspapers. The *Daily Telegraph* minority-ethnic readership makes up only 4 per cent of its total readership, the lowest figure of any title. The *Times*, *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail* have a figure of around 5 per cent, with the *Sun* significantly higher at 7.6 per cent. The two centre-left serious newspapers, *Guardian* and *Independent*, have the highest proportion of minority-ethnic readers, 11.5 per cent and 11.7 per cent respectively, apart from the *Financial Times* which has easily the highest figure, 16.2 per cent, thanks to its high readership of readers of Indian subcontinent origin.

This data comes from MORI and was collected in the year before the third Labour general election victory. Clearly it is dependent on the state of the parties at that time, but gives a clear picture of the party political inclinations

Table 2.7 Newspaper readership by voting intention (%)

Newspaper	Labour	Conservative	Liberal Democrats
All adults	35	33	22
Daily Mirror	60	16	17
Daily Star	53	18	15
Guardian	46	6	37
Sun	41	32	13
Independent	35	13	39
Express	27	46	17
Times	27	39	28
Financial Times	25	43	24
Daily Mail	21	55	16
Daily Telegraph	16	63	16
No paper	35	28	26

Source: MORI 2004

of the readership of individual titles, and the political views editorially of those titles. The *Daily Mirror* has the highest proportion of Labour voting readers (60 per cent) and the *Daily Telegraph* the highest proportion of Conservative voters (63 per cent). The *Independent* attracts the highest proportion of Liberal voters. Apart from the *Mirror*, the *Guardian*, *Star* and *Sun* have a preponderance of Labour voters, while as well at the *Telegraph* the *Express*, *Times*, *Financial Times* and *Daily Mail* are dominated by Conservative voters.

Compacts

The 'compact revolution' within Britain's broadsheet press was brought about by the failure of the *Independent* to recover from falling circulation and a series of changes of ownership and editor (six in seven years). It had failed to sustain its dream of independence from traditional ownership. The economic climate had changed for the worse within five years of its successful launch, and the cost of launching the *Independent on Sunday* in 1990 stretched the *Independent* too far. There followed a series of ownership arrangements, none true to the original concept, until Tony O'Reilly, the former Heinz executive, took full control in 1998.

While in many ways a traditional newspaper baron, he had a relationship with the paper he saved that went beyond that. He was prepared to suffer huge losses from the moment he took over, and while that inevitably led to reducing the editorial staffs of both the daily and Sunday titles, he

persevered. His appointment as editor-in-chief of Simon Kelner, a talented sports-production journalist who had been on the *Independent* at the start before moving to executive positions on the *Sunday Correspondent*, *Observer* and, moving out of sport, as editor of the *Daily Mail* supplement Night and Day, changed the uncertain atmosphere on the papers and brought stability, even if it failed to halt circulation decline. O'Reilly also brought in as chief executive Ivan Fallon, who had run his lucrative South African operation. Earlier Fallon was formerly business editor and deputy editor at the *Sunday Times*.

Sales of the daily were down to 220,000 at the end of 1998, as these three men considered the state of the *Independent* at the start of a new era of ownership. It was no small achievement for a new national newspaper to still be there more than a decade later, but it was dependent on O'Reilly underwriting it. After a series of strategies to rebuild the titles had failed, Kelner and Fallon came up with the 'big idea'. They would re-launch the *Independent* as a quality tabloid, or 'compact' as Kelner relentlessly described it to differentiate it from the mass-circulation redtops. O'Reilly endorsed the decision.

It was not in fact a new idea. As Roy Greenslade notes (2003: 258) the mid-market *Daily Mail*, then broadsheet and losing sale, went tabloid in May 1971 to coincide with the closure of its sister (tabloid) title the *Daily Sketch*. Lord Harmsworth, the chairman of Associated Newspapers, publishers of the *Mail*, referred to the re-launched *Mail* as a 'compact', but the word never caught on then. The *Mail* was selling 1.8 million before its 1971 re-launch. Today it sells 2.3 million.

The arguments surrounding the *Independent's* decision were not new, even to the quality sector of the market. Under Peter Preston's editorship of the *Guardian* (1995–2005) tabloid sections had been introduced, but even though Preston (a lover of Spanish and Italian small-format quality newspapers) seriously considered going all the way and making the main news section tabloid the risk was considered too great, the belief that broadsheet equalled quality being too deep rooted to be put aside.

Kelner and Fallon thought it all through again. They knew that market research carried out by broadsheet titles had repeatedly drawn a pro-tabloid response, particularly among commuters on crowded trains, younger readers and women readers, categories of great interest to advertisers. There was the long tradition of smaller-format quality papers in mainland Europe. There would be considerable initial publicity in changing format. And it was likely that sampling, even a gain in sale that stuck, would follow the re-launch. Against that there was the peculiarly British association of the word tabloid (simply a measure of size, half a broadsheet) with the downmarket, redtop sector of the market. Would there be accusations of 'dumbing down' if a serious broadsheet downsized? There were problems, too, about advertising revenue. Would advertisers pay the same for a full page in a tabloid as a full

page in a broadsheet? It was clearly less risky for the *Independent* than for papers with more conservative, and larger, audiences like the *Times* and *Telegraph*. *Independent* readers were younger, less resistant to change. And its low and declining circulation meant it had more to gain and less to lose by the change in size.

The *Independent* chose to hedge its bets, first printing the compact version alongside the broadsheet (a costly exercise, but one minimised by the small sale of the paper). The compact was launched inside the M25 on Tuesday, 30 September 2003, Monday to Friday only. It performed very well; the audited circulation for October 2003 was up 17,000 on the previous month. Better figures were to come as the compact was rolled out across the country. By November it was up another 5,000, by the following April a further 20,000. A Saturday compact was introduced on 31 January 2004, and the final step, to stop printing any broadsheets, came on Friday, 17 May 2004. A sale of 261,000 was recorded for that month, an increase of 40,000 year on year. Many of them came from the *Guardian*.

'For the first five years of my editorship', Kelner told *Media Guardian* (26 July 2004), 'on those afternoons when the monthly sales figures arrived, I used to look at them at a distance. Now I embrace them. They're phenomenal. We're 50,000 copies ahead year on year. We've gone up almost 40 per cent in some places.'

Although the public pronouncements from the rivals were dismissive, they were not entirely convincing; it was clear that they were worried. They too had done their market research and produced dummies of tabloid versions of their own newspapers. The *Independent* had stolen a lead, and whatever the rivals did now, however they explained it, they would be following. This worried the *Guardian* more than the *Times*. Rupert Murdoch told his *Times* editor, Robert Thomson, to prepare for a tabloid launch. Just seven weeks later it came, on Monday, 24 November 2003, with the compact selling alongside the broadsheet, just like the *Independent*. Thomson was forced to drop his attacks on the *Independent*. 'It is an undoubted success for which they deserve credit', he told *Press Gazette* (16 July 2004). 'We are grateful to them for having done the market research on how the audience would receive a compact quality newspaper.' The *Times*' own compact research was reported (in the *Times*, 9 July 2004) by Brian MacArthur. It showed that 'nearly half of compact readers are aged between 25 and 44, 60 per cent are in full-time work, that 78 per cent are ABC1s and that about 40 per cent work in the business sector.'

Some thought *Times* readers would be more resistant to change than the *Independent*'s, that to the lawyers, businessmen and politicians who read the paper a compact would not reflect their self-image. Murdoch had dealt with such concerns before, by ignoring them. He had cut the price, and been greatly criticised for that; but he had increased the circulation in so doing,

taking the *Times* to a secure second place in the quality sector. Again he was rewarded for his speedy reaction over changing the format. *The Times* also increased sales, 5 per cent over the first year, not as dramatic as the *Independent*, but it was starting from a much higher base, with percentage increases in sale smaller.

The two other broadsheet titles had different problems with changing format. The *Daily Telegraph*, with its 'middle-England' audience, older than its rivals, more conservative, more dispersed from London, was probably at greatest risk of reader resistance to a smaller format. Its then editor, Martin Newland, had also explored the tabloid option. But at this time the *Telegraph* editor and management had more important things to worry about. In the wake of the Conrad Black scandal the paper was for sale (see above).

The *Guardian* was in a different trap. It too had circulation problems and was a more direct competitor of the *Independent*. Its lead in sale had shrunk from 177,000 when both newspapers were broadsheet to 112,000 a year after the *Independent's* compact launch. The gap continued to contract, to 86,000. The *Guardian* was also more sensitive to accusations of imitating the *Independent*. It had its own reputation for innovation, in typography, supplements and marketing. It too had developed tabloid dummies, and many expected it to follow the *Independent* and *Times*. But Alan Rusbridger, the editor, had profound reservations about the tabloid, and probably more about following the lead of its lower-circulation rival. He was concerned about the effect on content and the nature of the paper tabloidisation would bring. He watched the *Independent* and *Times* carefully, measuring stories, comparing the content and presentation of the two versions of each paper. Rusbridger (2005) described the effects of shrinking the size of the two serious papers that had already gone compact: 'Punchy front pages; opinionated copy: views before news; picture-led layouts; striking, lively, focussed presentation; headlines with attitude; take-no-prisoners writing.' The two papers, he said, were claiming they were 'exactly the same ... just more convenient for the reader'. He was not, he claimed, saying the two papers were worse than the broadsheets that preceded them. 'All I say is that two of our most important newspapers have changed, quite strikingly, in ways beyond mere shape. And that is not without significance. How journalists tell stories has an effect on the civic process. Ask anyone in public life.'

Rusbridger could hardly launch a 'tabloid compact' after that. And anyway he was already determined to do something different. Thus was born the 'Berliner' concept, adopting for the *Guardian* not the well-known, in Britain, tabloid format, but the bigger, in-between format of the famous European papers like *Le Monde*. Rusbridger commissioned designs, and set a team on producing internally a daily Berliner-sized version of the *Guardian*. 'We started thinking about the Berliner size because it works so well. Tabloid forces change in terms of layout, one main story a page, one

Table 2.8

Title – compact launch date	Last true broadsheet sale – month	One year later – increase over broadsheet (%)	Three years later – increase over broadsheet (%)	Today – increase over broadsheet (%)
<i>Independent</i> 30 Sept. 2003	219,000 Sept. 2003	265,000 21% Sept. 2004	265,000 21% Sept. 2006	221,000 +0.9% Sept. 2008
<i>Times</i> 24 Nov. 2003	656,000 Oct. 2003	691,000 5% Nov. 2004	654,000 0% Nov. 2006	638,000 –3% Sept. 2008
<i>Guardian</i> 12 Sept. 2005	358,000 July 2005	389,000 9% Sept. 2006	349,000 Sept. 2008	349,000 –3% Sept. 2008
<i>Independent on Sunday</i> 16 Oct. 2005	203,000 Sept. 2005	234,000 15% Sept. 2006	n/a	183,000 –10% Sept. 2008
<i>Observer</i> 8 Jan. 2006	437,000 Nov. 2005	444,000 2% Jan. 2007	n/a	453,000 +4% Sept. 2008

Month of 'true' last broadsheet sale is last full month broadsheet and excludes 'untypical' months like December and August

Source: ABC

picture. It changes editorial and pushes you to an *Independent*-style front page. With the Berliner you don't fall into that trap. You have calmer typography, and it is less intrusive. You can linger on a spread. It has a calming effect' (interview with Cole, 2005).

But there were major, and expensive, problems in taking this path. There were no presses in Britain configured to print a Berliner. The *Guardian* had to make a huge investment, more than £50 million, in new presses to print the new format. And the time taken building them was time spent as a broadsheet competing with a compact *Independent* and *Times*. The Berliner *Guardian* launched on Monday 12 September 2005, two years after the compact *Independent*, gaining 9 per cent in the first year. The *Independent on Sunday* went compact a month later, increasing sale by 15 per cent in its first year (ABC); the Berliner *Observer* launched in January 2006, putting on an initial 9 per cent. Apart from the *IoS* the increase was nothing like as dramatic as that of the first compacts. By now the *Times* and *Independent*, familiar as compacts, had passed through the early surge although they were still enjoying circulation much increased over their previous broadsheets. Table 2.8 shows the effect to the end of 2008 of compact re-launch on the titles that chose this path, showing compact gain or loss in circulation compared with final broadsheet month:

The *Independent*, the paper that started the compact revolution, and thus publishing in the new form for the longest, was just ahead of its last broadsheet figure, and so was the *Observer*. The *Guardian*, *Times* and *Independent on Sunday* had all slipped back to below their last broadsheet figures. All gained initially from the transition and enjoyed two or three years of higher sale. Then the declining circulation continuing across the newspaper market kicked in and the compacts started to suffer too. But it has to be remembered that at the time they went compact all the broadsheet titles were losing sales, so it can be assumed that their figures today would be worse if they had not changed their format. In the end the public became used to compact 'broadsheets' and the decision to purchase or not was based on other factors. But Simon Kelner's initiative changed the face of the serious national press in Britain. As he said himself (interview with Roy Greenslade: *Media Guardian*, 26 July 2004)

We've certainly made people think seriously about how their newspapers are packaged and delivered, and we've challenged the prejudices and preconceptions about whether it's possible to do an upmarket quality tabloid. Whether we've revolutionised the entire newspaper market we'll only know when the revolution is over. It's just the beginning.

It has been followed all over the world. The World Association of Newspapers estimated in its 2006 World Press Trends report that around 80 titles had adopted the compact format; but it also warned, prophetically, that circulation increases tended to disappear over time (World Association of Newspapers, 2006).

We look now at the non-London press – at the regions and nations, as the BBC refers to that which is not the metropolis.