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New editors of the Guardian are given a simple instruction: to continue it 'on the same lines and in the same spirit as heretofore.' In practice that means: be ready to change with changing circumstances, but never forget your core traditions.

That was the calculation as the Manchester Guardian became The Guardian in 1959. This would no longer be a paper for Manchester: it would be one which operated in a national dimension. London and the south-east were the places to find new readers; and London especially was where most essential decisions were made nowadays.

Alastair Hetherington, taking on the editorship of the MG in 1956, was pitched straight away in to the Suez crisis. As CP Scott had done with the Boer War: he dissented, and was denounced as a traitor. Beyond that his great test was the shift of control in 1964 from Manchester to London, as part of which he relocated himself. The early days were bleak: financial prospects were so alarming that management people embarked, behind the editor's back, on a scheme to merge the Guardian with the Times. It could never have worked; but its abandonment left the Guardian facing hard times and daunting needs for economy.

The pace of change was set to become more furious. Peter Preston, taking over in 1975, was determined to professionalise a paper often derided as amateur. From new offices in Farringdon Road, he made it more appealing, in appearance and tone as much as in content, to new and younger buyers, especially by launching in 1992 a tabloid insertion which he called G2. In 1982, with a courage that echoed Hetherington's on Suez, he had opposed an apparently popular war, this time with Argentina. The paper now became more intent on investigations and exposures.

In 1995 Preston was succeeded by Alan Rusbridger, and the Guardian operation was soon transfigured. The vocabulary of journalism was being rewritten in an age shaped round the internet, and the birth of

an electronic journalism which might open a small British newspaper up to an international audience. America and Australia were given their own editions, and developed a global reach.

Guardian initiatives duly made news across the world, as in the revelations from Julian Assange and Edward Snowden which governments fought to suppress. The paper also sought ways of involving readers in all its processes and – especially since as it ruled out paywalls as limiting access – to conjure money out of them.

When Rusbridger resigned in 2015, the job seemed certain to go to a woman. Katharine Viner became its first female editor (though the title now was editor-in-chief). That was in line with a dominant commitment to wider diversity, stated all the more insistently because it was heard so little elsewhere, with close attention to the interests, hopes and grievances of women and of ethnic communities. An office that had always been overwhelmingly male and overwhelmingly white must no longer be so. LGBTQ groups too had a champion in the Guardian. Indeed, when in 2021 it celebrated its 200th anniversary it was clear that a new generation found much in 'heretofore' which called for apology. The paper had been run by a patriarchy, and been riddled with racism and misogyny. And too much of its initial funding had come from the profits of slavery. Another crucial commitment was saving the planet. It signalled that by always talking of 'climate crisis' rather than 'climate change.'

In 1992 a Guardian statement of purpose promised not to take on any close alignment with any political party. In the 1950s, the MG had twice endorsed the Tories at elections. That was unthinkable now. Once portrayed as a Liberal paper (CP Scott had been a Liberal MP while editor of the MG) it was now Lib Lab with the emphasis very much on the Lab.

In the summer of 2023 the Guardian announced it would no longer take advertising from a gambling industry which ruined the lives of too many. The revenue would be missed but as the paper reported, 'the Guardian Group increasingly relies on contributions from readers rather than advertising for its income.'

Here was a decision wholly in line with the spirit of heretofore.



Guardian

Additional notes

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