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February 22nd, 2015

Why it matters who edits the Guardian

0 comments

Estimated reading time: 5 minutes



Imagine a north London liberal journalist version of *The Apprentice*. This week, four Guardian hacks (one ex-Guardian) will perform in front of their newsroom colleagues as part of **hustings** to win the vote for the editorship of the Kings Place press.

It's a classic chunk of **Guardian fudge**. The hustings are being organised by the NUJ and is open to all core editorial staff but it will only be 'advisory' – though the candidate chosen via the NUJ process will be guaranteed a place on the shortlist for interview. And there are 22 other applicants who are not in the hustings.

[You can see the [four hustings candidates' personal statements here](#)]

Do you care? Well, if you are interested in the future of healthy journalism in the UK and around the world, then you should. A bit. And anyway, it's going to be a lot of fun.



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The Guardian is, like the Mail or the Sun, the kind of newspaper that divides opinion. Self-indulgent, chaotically-managed, politically-confused, editorially riven between transgender quinoa recipes and treacherous leaks of national security information... *or*...digital pioneers of open journalism, speaking truth to power around the globe, holding aloft a beacon of liberal, ethical, creative content in a world of profit-seeking, proprietor-driven play-safes? You chose.

Having [met them en masse](#), the core Guardian readers are incredibly loyal. That's a valuable core asset. Sales of the paper are dwindling towards the niche end of the spectrum but there's no rush to turn off the presses. The global online traffic is in similar territory to the New York Times. The journalistic brand has never been brighter thanks to the extraordinarily brave WikiLeaks and Snowden scoops. Only last week they attracted two of our brightest female talents, Holly Watts (Investigations Editor, Telegraph) and Alice Ross (Ex Bureau of Investigative Journalism/Times) to add to recent high-profile recruits such as Matthew D'Ancona and former Le Monde editor, Natalie Nougayrède. At the same time they produce click-bait Google Glass-filmed dating encounters that mean they can compete with the likes of Mail Online.

Their losses are on the way down towards a 'manageable level' thanks to the efforts of also-departing CEO Andrew Miller. Because

of their trust structure and a healthy endowment fund from sales of assets this means that they probably are **on track to what passes for sustainability** on the roller coaster ride that is the news media economy these days.

The Guardian Gig

So being editor of the Guardian is not a bad gig. Rusbridger (see **my profile here**) was personally very powerful with a seat on the Trust and an autocratic dominance of the newsroom that, some say, drove his heir apparent, Ian Katz, to his current berth at BBC Newsnight. This is a place where you can try out new ideas. There is plenty of talent in the building and a whole range of new platforms to explore.

Considering its relatively small paper sales The Guardian has a disproportionate influence in public life. It is the paper for the Labour Party elite, who often hate what it writes. While the liberal establishment at places like the BBC may read the Mail for guidance on the real world their heart (and probably their subscription) is with the Guardian. In the US and Australia it is more marginal, but providing a different kind of voice with an increasing profile.

So the person who will set the editorial strategy matters.

My sense is that the Trust does not have a firm view on the type of leader it wants and that it is more open to an outsider than I had previously thought. Indeed, in typically unpatriotic Guardian fashion, they may go so far as to appoint a non-Brit. Wolfgang Blau is, as his name suggests, from Germany, and considering the importance of the US market it is not surprising that American names are in the hat.

Variety of Candidates

I think it is encouraging that even with the four candidates who have declared to face their colleagues there is some variety. There's even a journalism professor in the race. I am sure it is only a coincidence that Columbia's Emily Bell, a former digital director of the Guardian, has been travelling the UK making **speeches about the future of journalism** in the last few months. As with all the candidates, I am a fan. She wrote the **preface to my last book**. The Guardian is probably the only UK newspaper that might (re)hire an academic. As **I wrote elsewhere**, the previous editor was something of philosopher king, but Emily is also very nuts and bolts. She has spent the last few years at Columbia University finding out new ways to do journalism better in the digital era.

And from in-house there is Wolfgang Blau, the current director of digital strategy. Wolfgang also has a professorial air and is a natural Big Ideas person. German news media is rather different to the UK (some would say more serious, intellectual and less digitally adventurous) but it's just as concerned about efficiency and adaption. As this **short blog post** about mobile journalism shows, he has an ability to identify strategic challenges.

The two deputy editors in the race are contrasting figures. The stereotyper would say that Janine Gibson is the frontline hack who successfully managed the thriller-like Snowden process with all its legal, editorial and personnel issues. But she also launched the empire-building Guardian US office in one of the most competitive media markets in the world, so she knows how to build as well as investigate.

Kath Viner is seen as someone with more of a background in features but you only have to read **her speech on open journalism** to see that she understands the strategic picture. She has also

launched a Guardian outpost in Australia and is now in charge in New York. For The Guardian, like all digital news organisations, content is about much more than news, so her wider journalism range might be what is needed.

The external favourite must be Ian Katz, currently editing Newsnight at the BBC. He's come under fire there for budget management and perhaps inevitably from BBC insiders who say that the programme has 'lost direction' and is struggling for viewers and stories. But he was previously seen as the next-in-line and is a bold editorial leader who still commands a lot of loyalty within the Guardian. Gaining some outside experience in another medium and a public service organisation can't hurt his chances.

Why It Matters

So plenty of options for the Trust out of that 26 and I hope they get it right. The Guardian is more fragile than my earlier optimistic gloss on its future suggests. Even in the liberal end of the market there is a lot of competition. The New York Times with its vast resources is stirring itself beyond the US. Newcomers like the eBay funded, Greenwald-edited Intercept are homing in on the anti-establishment market. The open, free model is great but what happens when the social networks and the burgeoning ranks of new platforms such as Instagram or Snapchat keep more of the revenue that your content attracts?

And there is still uncertainty about its 'brand' identity as it goes ever further from its Manchester roots. What kind of role does the Guardian want to have? Is it a serious player with intelligent content and a familiarity with power? Or is it the placard-waving outsider that keeps getting distracted by shiny new tech and funny memes on

twitter? Of course, it could be both, but that takes tremendous leadership.

This matters in the UK because for some odd reason, we don't have as much liberal/left press as the voting figures would suggest we should. Even allowing for the centre/liberal heft of the BBC there is a need for a strong liberal/left voice to bring plurality to the UK's public debate. And globally, at a time when autocratic regimes in China, Russia, Turkey and elsewhere are on the rise both in terms of their power and their media influence, it would be good to have a credible left/liberal alternative that can speak for the kind of humanism, secularism, and multi-culturalism that we associate with the Guardian.

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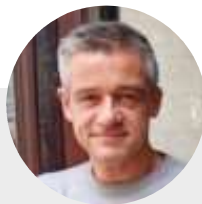
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