


Sun On Sunday: what price success?

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Rupert's new baby

There has been a paradoxical series of responses to the Sun on Sunday's highly successful launch, especially from more liberal commentators.

These seem to break down into:

1. It's too bland (it's not the News of the World)
2. It hasn't got much hard news in it (It's not the Sunday Times)
3. It's too successful (Murdoch is taking over the world again)

Much of the sniping seems to misunderstand the nature of the contemporary tabloid. It would not take a genius to work out that a paper called the Sun on Sunday and edited by the editor of the Sun would look quite a lot like the Sun.

If you've read Britain's most popular daily newspaper over the last few years you'll see it's changed from the aggressive, nasty, narrow-minded beast it was in the 80s/90s. It is now softer, wittier, cleverer, aspirational and more human-centred (still right-wing of course). In this it reflects how its readership has changed and the place of newspapers in people's lives (a smaller place).

So Katie Price writing (a rather dull) column about the virtues of state schools for the Sun on Sunday was surprising only if you don't realise that 'Jordan' is now a central figure in popular culture for her life and views, not just her breasts.

Overall, the Sun on Sunday was very post-Leveson cautious in tone and content and some of the features (eg the desertification of the Aral Sea) felt like filler from an old edition of Titbits or the Daily Express magazine. But it's early days and it always takes columnists, editors and reporters time to get into their stride. Overall, it was nothing like the News of the World, but I genuinely think that News International realise that brand is now history.

The three million sales figures touted by Murdoch on Twitter will need confirming (how many are real sales?) and will probably dip in the coming weeks as the novelty wears off. But even if sales settled at, say, two million that would still have it ahead of the Mail on Sunday and the Sunday Mirror which are its natural rivals. So the rather tepid formula may work. (My favourite example of a loss of editorial nerve was the Page Three Girl. Why not get rid of it completely? Why have a model covering her own breasts?)

The most serious issue around the Sun on Sunday is not how exciting it was (or wasn't). This is not a great newspaper, but then most of the Sundays are not Great Newspapers any more. I am delighted that there is a new source of employment for journalists and that this paper is less offensive in its pursuit of sales.

The real significance is that it reminds us of the market power of Murdoch. The cover price was slashed and there was reasonable investment in advertising, columnists and staff. News International's slice of the newspaper pie is a lot bigger again.

Perhaps you recall, before the phone-hacking scandal blew up and Leveson began his inquiry, the Big Media Industry Controversy was the [proposed full takeover by News Corporation of BSkyB](#). There was an important and bitter [debate](#) about the degree to which Rupert Murdoch dominated British media and journalism in particular. Legislators and regulators appeared powerless to stop Mr Murdoch from expanding his empire.

Thanks mainly to the phone-hacking scandal, that's not back on the agenda for a few years. And it has to be said,

that expanding the Sun brand when it is likely to face more flak at Leveson could be seen as at best cheeky and at worst, brazen. [Low and behold [today's Leveson revelations](#) by Met Police investigator Sue Akers are dramatic and imply massive and far-reaching system of corrupt payments at The Sun]

The Sun on Sunday in itself doesn't even take Murdoch's market share back to pre-phone-hacking levels. But it reminds us that despite some reports of his disillusion with Britain/newspapers/journalism he has no desire to leave the battlefield. Indeed, the Sun on Sunday shows us that he can still throw fresh troops into the fray.

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