

# The Observer: why bin it?

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It is a kind of irony that the [campaign](#) to save the Observer has taken off on Twitter. It's the first time that the venerable Sunday newspaper has had any online impact.

The [plans to close the title](#) discussed at the Guardian Media Group's lovely new modern HQ in Kings Cross have caused a storm in liberal media-land way beyond the real importance of this institution. [Newsnight](#), for example, devoted a major film and a two person discussion to the threat of closure, alone. I bet they wouldn't do that for the actual demise of, say, The Express or Sunday People (or ITV). Arguably, The Observer is neither a major commercial nor journalistic enterprise.

Much of the outcry has focussed on the fact that The Observer is very old and quite liberal, rather than what it offers editorially and as part of GMG. It feels a bit like those campaigns to keep open a stately home that no-one visits anymore.

I think there is a case for closure – or at the very least, to merge it into the Guardian as a 7-day operation.

The Observer suffers from the same problem facing all Sundays. What does it do that the Saturdays don't? Nothing. The Guardian Review is much better than Observer Arts, for example. How does it add value?

The monthly magazines are glossy but they are packed with the same lifestyle and human interest that fills the newspaper itself. I have no problem with that if it sells, but please don't pretend it is somehow an 'important' journalistic institution.

## Pret a Porter

Just because Henry Porter is allowed to rant every week does not make it a campaigning newspaper. Give him a blog. I read Andrew Rawnsley avidly, but increasingly online. Interestingly, he seems to devote far more time to his online activities at [Politicshome](#). It is months since The Observer had a front page story or investigation that really stood out.

This is not entirely its fault. The Sundays used to stand out as more thoughtful, more critical and punchier. But now everyone is doing it they have lost any added value.

The Sunday Times has countered this by becoming an omnibus and upped its price to pay for it. I think that meant the only option for the Observer was to head upmarket and become a kind of LRB meets Huffington Post. Instead it went for the over-crowded consumerist market.

## Bemoaning Blairism

Leftists like [Nick Davies](#) and at places like [Liberal Conspiracy](#) bemoan its Blairite values. They may have a point. Perhaps it would stand out more if it was at least as lefty as the Guardian. But that's an argument for merger, not preservation of the title.

And I don't think it adds greatly to media plurality. A tepid and hollow liberal newspaper does not really contribute a vast amount to public discourse. Increasingly, we look to the Internet for diversity and the Observer simply does not have an online presence.



Now this all sounds rather hostile or callous. Far from it. Today I saw two [TV news programmes shut down](#) that I had helped launch. A few hundred thousand people every day have been denied a little bit of broadcast diversity. It is sad to see any journalistic entity pass over to that newsroom in the sky.

## **No Closure**

But we are in a period of unprecedented media change. The extraordinary fact is that – so far – no major newspaper has closed. Plenty have shut in the past and new journalistic platforms have opened up.

GMG is facing what one of its senior editors described as ‘carnage’ in a [speech](#) to Polis. A few cynics see some kind of Scott Trust plot and Grauniad office politics in the threat to The Observer. There may be some truth in that. But the overwhelming fact here is that all newspaper groups are having to reinvent their businesses and that means pruning as well as planting seeds.

The Observer falling sales are not any worse than the Guardian’s – I don’t have the figures on it’s ad revenue or budget. So I can’t judge if what GMG is considering is wise in accounting terms.

## **Shaky Bedrock**

But I do know that those campaigning to ‘save’ The Observer would be better off thinking of new ways of reinventing the tradition of independent, liberal, intelligent journalism. They will have to accept that some treasured (but neglected) editorial edifices are going to crumble when the bedrock is shaken.

The task for GMG and the rest of us is not just to keep particular titles or programmes going. The real task is to find fresh finance and new ways to connect. That is not about [preserving all our fortresses](#), it is about opening up new networks.

That may sound naive, but I think I am being utterly realistic. I don’t particularly wish to see The Observer off the newstands. It may well not disappear. But I believe it is particularly vulnerable and we are doing journalism a disservice by not thinking through what might come after.

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