

Sun Editor Rebekah Wade speaks: why journalism matters and how it can survive

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2009/01/26/rebekah-wade-speaks-why-journalism-matters-and-how-it-can-survive-by-connecting-to-its-audience/

2009-1-26

Sun editor [Rebekah Wade](#)'s rare foray into public speaking at this year's [Cudlipp Lecture](#) produced a charming, chilling and compelling masterclass in editorial strategy and delivery. She may look like a cross between Catherine Tate and a Pre-Raphaelite damsel but she confirmed her status as one of the most successful media leaders in contemporary British journalism.



This was not one of those parades of prejudice or nostalgic self-indulgences that some newspaper editors are tempted into when they give a grand public lecture. Wade's speech at the [London College of Communication](#) was all about the art of the possible.



There was the usual taunting of the liberal media, especially the Guardian. But what was interesting was her exposition of campaigning journalism and the need to connect with the customer in the digital age.

There were some cracking stories of her career which started as Eddie Shah's teagirl, included sewing sexist executive's shirt buttons on at the News of the World and swilling beer with Sun readers at holiday camps.

She warned of threats to newspaper freedoms through the judicial creation of a privacy law and indulgent political correctness.

There were amusing tales of tabloid coups and editorial disasters which all seemed to end with the phrase "and then they were all fired".

Interestingly, she almost admitted having a copy of the Hutton report when her paper famously broke that epic story, although she hastily corrected herself to 'a copy of the contents'. Apparently the then Mirror editor Piers Morgan did try to steal it from her handbag while in a restaurant.

She stressed the News International line that the Sun's success is all down to editorial investment. They have put the savings from digital efficiency back into the journalism in contrast to their less successful rivals who have taken the money and run, [she said](#).

There is some truth in this. The Sun still has the best tabloid content in Britain and much of this, she insisted, is built on campaigns such as the one for [Sarah's Law](#). Liberals decried this campaign which led some people to attack paediatricians mistaken for paedophiles. But while Wade accepted there were 'lessons to be learned' she was adamant that 'journalism matters' and campaigns make a difference. But their real value for the paper is that they connect the editorial with the reader. They tell the reader that the Sun is listening to them and working on their behalf to represent their views.

On top of this, Sun journalists spend days with Sun readers on the budget short-haul holidays that the newspaper sells so profitably for as little as £9.50. This produced an amusing [anecdote](#) about Yasser Arafat, political editor George Pascoe Watson and an irate Sun Reader.

And this is where I thought Wade was most interesting. She does not claim to 'understand' her readers instinctively. She works at it. And that now includes using the digital data available from their online interactions as well as market research and conversations in holiday camp bars.

She likened it to Obama's success in tapping into supporters and then holding their attention and engagement. "There is a huge appetite for journalism" she says, but we have to learn how to deliver it and that means listening to

the public. It also means all journalists have to be multi-skilled and constantly looking to connect to their readers and give them added value:

“If a journalist thinks that rewriting a press release is journalism then they won’t have a job [at the Sun]”

Wade has a brilliant sense of how you combine traditional big-hitting tabloid journalism with acute audience targetting. It’s a red-top version of what I call [Networked Journalism](#).

It recognises that you shouldn’t put audiences in pigeon-holes. “The reader has a gamut of emotions including humour” says Wade.

She recognises that 2009 will see a seismic change which could include some institutions going under, but she thinks that the papers that go down will be the ones cutting back on their journalism. There was some triumphalism, but in an innovative way. For example, she pointed out that The Sun’s main competitor for ad revenue is not other tabloids any more, but ITV. That’s convergence for you.

Read her full speech [here](#).

Read the more irreverant account from [Media Monkey here](#)

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science