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A Brief History of *The Independent*

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Various source media, *The Independent Digital Archive 1986-2016*



Ever since it was launched in 1986, *The Independent* has enjoyed a reputation for quality and innovation, something Andreas Whittam-Smith and his two co-founders, Stephen Glover and Matthew Symonds, made as a guiding principle when they conceived the idea of a new, upmarket British newspaper.

Partly, their determination to be creative and to maintain the highest of standards was borne out of necessity. The market for newspapers was very crowded and *The Independent* was trying to elbow aside *The Times*, *Guardian*, and *Daily Telegraph*, and possibly the *Financial Times* as well.

From the off, that desire expressed itself in a clean, fresh design for a broadsheet. Black and white photography was to be celebrated, not crowded out with newsprint, so there was plenty of white space. Stories were longer than elsewhere with due heed given to original, vivid writing. The paper respected the intelligence of its readers - it did not preach and did not patronise. In tone, it was authoritative and knowing, but also, where power and influence were concerned, questioning and probing. It covered the waterfront of news, same as its rivals, but in some areas it was stronger than others. "The *Indy*", as it soon became known, made politics, business, foreign news, comment and the arts, especially books, its own.

In Whittam-Smith, too, it had a leader who was not easily bracketed. A former City editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, in many ways a grandee, but a maverick with a non-conformist streak, Andreas could be

pronouncing on a major takeover one minute, and then decrying a lack of social justice the next.

Partly, then, the paper was the embodiment of its chief: a true independent character. And that individualism spilled over into innovation. In its early years, *The Indy* was commented upon and marvelled at as a product of great beauty. Even if someone did not agree with its avowedly liberal heart, they could not deny its groundbreaking aesthetic.

It wasn't just in looks, however, that *The Independent* sought to put clear space between itself and the opposition. Early on, the paper took a decision to remain outside the Parliamentary lobby system. The *Indy* would source its statements, and that included from the Prime Minister's spokesman. If Downing Street was not prepared to let that happen, then so be it - *The Independent* was not going to deceive its readers by being spoon-fed and not saying so.

Other aspects of journalism that were regarded as acceptable on other titles would not pass muster at the *Indy*. So the paper paid for its travel features, rather than take "freebies" from holiday operators. Likewise, it paid its own way in restaurants so there was no doubt its reviews were untainted. For a long time too, *The Indy* resisted allowing its journalists to go on press trips, taking the view that nothing was to be gained from going in a pack and being subjected to PR "spin". A far better use of the reporter's time, reasoned *The Indy* chiefs, was for him or her to be pursuing their own story.

The *Indy* succeeded, too, in attracting like-minded spirits. Its birth coincided, not accidentally, with growing unrest at the hold over British life of Rupert Murdoch. He owned *The Times*, and that meant in some quarters Britain's oldest quality newspaper could no longer claim to be independent in thought and deed. Whittam-Smith thought he saw a gap in the market vacated by *The Times* and went for it. His move was soon vindicated when the Murdoch titles became embroiled in the Wapping dispute after their owner attempted to break the print unions by spiriting their production away to East London.

Many *Times* "refuseniks" simply left and joined *The Independent*, rather than cross picket lines. This influx of talent not only gave the new paper a head-start but contributed to its rebellious, won't-be-cowed, character.

Murdoch, as is his wont, hit back. In March 1992, during the general election of that year, *The Indy* circulation reached 440,000, overhauling *The Times*. Murdoch's response was to cut the price of *The Times*.

What was *The Independent's* response? Only to raise its own cover price. In true *Indy* fashion, the counter-intuitive move was designed to show that its readers would not be governed by price, and that price wars were for other, lesser titles. It also emphasised the value of independent journalism, and that the paper stood firmly for quality, not a cut-price, reduced offering. In the end, Murdoch's pressure told. The paper was never able to recapture the heights immediately prior to Murdoch's price cut. But those

competitive forces have not prevented *The Independent* from remaining true to its origins. It has still consistently led the field in terms of trying new formats.

When *The Independent* on Sunday was born, it introduced to the Sunday market an object of rare beauty - the "Sunday Review". Until then, there had been Sunday supplements, but this was completely different. It was produced on large-sized paper, its writing was of an exceptionally high standard, and throughout there were the most sumptuous photographs. It combined everything - lifestyle, food and drink, the arts, book reviews - in one, must-keep magazine.

Through the years, other innovations followed. When research showed that readers were looking for a smaller formatted daily paper, one that would fit easily in a briefcase or bag, and could be read comfortably on the train, *The Independent* took the plunge and went "compact".

But the introduction of the smaller format was also done in a uniquely, *Indy* way. Instead of canning the broadsheet shape in favour of the tabloid, for a period they were produced together, side by side. Readers could therefore make the transition gradually, and get used to the new size, and satisfy themselves that it still contained all their favourite sections and writers, before the plug was pulled, finally, on the broadsheet. Throughout, *The Indy* has never wavered from its belief in great writing. That passion, possibly an obsession, remains at the heart of everything it does. Today,

famous names like Patrick Cockburn and Rupert Cornwell grace its pages. If you want to know what is happening in the Middle East, to be able to put events there in context, then you cannot ignore Robert Fisk. Likewise, in business, Hamish McRae is the sage who specialises in being ahead of the markets, constantly proved right in his predictions and forecasts. In football, nothing moves without Sam Wallace or Ian Herbert knowing about it.

The list of star names is long. Even more extensive is the roll-call of those who have graced the paper's pages since inception. Sebastian Faulks, Andrew Marr, Peter Jenkins, Miles Kington, Zoe Heller, Helen Fielding, James Lawton, Simon Calder, James Fenton... the famous by-lines go on and on.

Fortunately, they are easily accessed and their peerless words safely preserved. All articles from *The Independent's* relatively short but glorious history have been archived and are available online. It's another new twist from the title that does not know how to stand still. Be our guests; enjoy some of the best, most powerful, most informative writing over the past nearly three decades. Happy reading.

CITATION

Tate, Steve: "A Brief History of *The Independent*." *The Independent Digital Archive 1986-2016*: Cengage Learning, 2016

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