

THE CONVERSATION

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The Sunday Post: how Scotland's sleepest newspaper silenced the detractors

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Boab's yer uncle. DC Thomson

During the 100-year-plus history of Scotland's Sunday Post, people have often said it is without compare – but they didn't always intend it positively. When The Guardian's media writer Roy Greenslade once applauded the onset of its modernisation in 2011, he observed:

When I first read it, back in the 1970s, I was amazed that it had any audience at all. So I was astonished to be told that its odd mix of quirky news, sentimental stories and cartoon strips had made it the best-selling paper in Scotland by far.

What a contrast to now. The Post was recently named Newspaper of the Year at the Scottish Press Awards, alongside plaudits under the “front page”, “scoop”, “reporter” and “journalist” categories. For anyone that knows this paper, it is an astounding achievement.

Still published by the privately owned Dundee-based DC Thomson, whose stable includes Dundee's Courier and Aberdeen's Press and Journal, the Post was always a peculiarly Scottish institution.

It might not have fitted easily beside externally recognised Scottish stereotypes such as whisky distilleries, country houses and golf hotels. But Scots themselves well understood what sort of nation the Post's unreconstructed parochialism represented – inward, conservative, folksy, reassuring and complacent.

DC Thomson's stable of comics including *The Beano* and *The Dandy* did nothing to encourage any sense of the Post as a serious newspaper – even if, in fairness, the company's Dundee training schemes for young reporters have produced many of Scotland's finest journalists for generations.

But by the early 2000s it was hard to imagine the Post as a player in any rational world of media marketing. It was serving grandparents – and pretty much no one else. Even by the standards of the wider newspaper industry, the controls seemed set full throttle for oblivion.

You needed to remind yourself that once, the Post had served a huge demographic. In the late 1960s it claimed a readership of a staggering 2.9m, around 80% of the 16-plus Scottish population. Its sales once represented the highest per-capita readership penetration in the world, according to the Guinness Book of Records.



Who you calling sleepy? DC Thomson



Glory days.

The Post was a given of Scottish life – like shortbread, constant rain, Irn Bru and the Church of Scotland. And when its decline later gathered pace, it was seen as emblematic of the same trend putting paid to both the Kirk and the Scottish Tories. With two out of three now seemingly back in business, the nation's presbyteries might be forgiven for wondering if they could yet tap into these unlikely powers of resurrection.

Scotland's press

The Post has for some time been asserting a different sort of identity for the Scottish public, perhaps many of whom are still startled to make the discovery. If the foundations for this were not exactly revolutionary – more news, better reporting, new features, layout and design enhancements – they have certainly had the desired effect.

Most of Scotland's media is externally owned and controlled. This includes the other Scottish newspaper titles with national presumptions: The Herald and Daily Record are owned by UK or American groups; The Scotsman is owned by Johnston Press, whose "Scottishness" is at best debatable these days. DC Thomson is really the sole Scottish proprietor of newspapers beyond local level.

When you reflect that the Gaelic language BBC Alba is the only indigenous TV channel, all this external ownership becomes all the more significant – not least for the varied needs of Scottish civil society. This is highly anomalous by European standards. Ireland, to take an adjacent case, has several TV channels owned and controlled in the Republic, and a viable indigenous press.

The Scottish press is generally under-resourced and likely to become more so, partly because of this pattern of ownership. It is the poor cousin of London newspapers and conglomerate interests – witness the rampant Scottish editions of The Times, Sun and Daily Mail.

Scotland's newspapers tend to be bound editorially in their representation of Scottish affairs, viewing them negatively and in a spirit generally unfriendly towards constitutional change – with fairly minor exceptions like the Sunday Herald and The National. This pattern is not new and not getting any better.

Scottish titles have displayed far too much reliance on secondary source material, opinion pieces and features. So it is refreshing to see the Post putting real effort and resources into one of the major absences in Scottish journalism – investigative reporting. The title was rightly praised at the Press Awards for its difficult and painful stories on the discovery of a mass grave at an orphanage near Glasgow.

It's encouraging, too, to see a Windrush piece in the latest edition – with a Dundee focus – responding sensitively to a current political issue with global implications, while staying true to its roots. And on the front page and beyond, a well researched, detailed and balanced account of a benefits case which avoids the often prejudicial and sensational nature of UK newspaper finger-pointing at recipients.

It must be said that this hasn't yet translated into an improvement in circulation. Sales are now below 120,000, and more than one-fifth of them are from south of the border. That's about 14% below the 141,000 in May 2017, which itself was 12% down on the previous year.



Scoop of the Year 2018. DC Thomson

This is no less dismal than the rest of the Scottish press – and in some cases worse. Editorial reinvigoration is enough of an achievement – sales revival in the current market seems to remain the stuff of fantasy. The consolation for DC Thomson in this difficult environment is that profits from other ventures such as technology services are more than making up for the print decline.

So, while the future of the Sunday Post remains far from certain, it stands as an object lesson in how to reinvent yourself. Maybe it can provide some encouragement to countless other titles simultaneously battling to maintain readers and credibility.



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