

The Philosopher King of Networked Journalism Stands Down, The Legacy Lives

Like his newspaper, Alan Rusbridger is a man of contradictions. A privately-educated, Oxbridge radical. A powerful voice for open, accountability journalism who mumbles his way through public events. A passionate democrat who ruled his editorial fiefdom like an hereditary monarch.

I also remember him as the chap with the funny furry dogs that used to do quite well at the dog show at our local street party in liberal north London.



He will stay in the building as chair of the Scott Trust, but this is a figure-head, mystic role rather than hands on. So there will be a real chance for the next editor to build on his remarkable legacy but also to straighten out a few serious kinks in the Guardian model.

But first we should acknowledge the bravery of a man who published not just the WikiLeaks revelations, but also the Snowden data bomb in the teeth of physical, political and personal intimidation from the highest authorities and despite the risks of working with such unusual characters as Julian Assange on such sensitive, complex and important topics. [You can [hear him talking about that last March at the Polis conference.](#)]

He is also, like John Birt at the BBC, an historic digital visionary who chose the open path, the interactive mind-set, of working across boundaries with the reader and journalist in a mutually beneficial relationship. It's one [I set out in a book](#), but one that Alan put into practice.

And that was not without risk. When I chaired some sessions at the [Guardian Open Weekend](#) back in 2012 with Alan and groups of hard-core Guardianista readers he was fearful that they would tear him limb from limb for ever daring to suggest changes to their beloved newspaper, let alone, to raise the possibility of turning off the presses. But instead they came to praise. Indeed, some of them wanted to volunteer as moderators while others (almost literally) offered to sell their grandmothers.

Its paper sales may be small and declining but Rusbridger has sustained the paper's vital role in British society and its grip on the liberal imagination. Indeed, thanks to its global expansion it now has taken that ethos around the world.

Of course, the Guardian also infuriates. It has emerged with a survival plan thanks to the shrewd sales of assets by CEO Andrew Miller (read his [recent Polis lecture here](#)) and it's not-for-profit status under the Scott Trust. How galling is that if you are trying to come up with a business model in the open market? And, of course, it remains incredibly self-indulgent, self-referential, cliquey, often childish, and creatively chaotic. Under Rusbridger's autocracy there appeared to be many chiefs with little control of the indians. That may be why it worked so well at times and pioneered so many editorial innovations such as the live blog.

I once suggested to a senior Guardian journalist that it might be good if the next editor came from outside. This was greeted with all the horror of suggesting Richard Dawkin could be a candidate for the papacy. So I don't think you have to look beyond Janine Gibson with her superb handling of the Snowden story or Kath Viner, who has already put her [vision of the open journalism future](#) into the public domain. Though of course, there are other interesting figures such as Jonathan Freedland and Deputy Editor Paul Johnson.

But whoever does take over has significant challenges as well as a wonderful inheritance. The financial waters

are still shark-infested and choppy. Digital change will continue to re-structure this industry and the Guardian's current online success has still not translated into the profit it will need for development.

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