

## The Guardian Redesign

Mark Porter (creative director, *Guardian*)

Alan Rusbridger (editor, *Guardian*)

***‘A newspaper’s primary office is the gathering of news. At the peril of its soul it must see that the supply is not tainted.’***

**CP Scott, editor, Manchester Guardian (1872-1929)**

When the *Independent* launched its new tabloid format on 30 September 2003, it was a shock for the *Guardian*’s creative team, renowned for its strong design ethos and forward-thinking approach. Plans for its own reformat were already under way and this was not good news. ‘We’d always been the British paper that took design most seriously,’ says Mark Porter, the *Guardian*’s creative director. ‘We’ve always had a reputation for that and I suppose we always liked to think we were the most innovative British paper.’ But it wasn’t long before the *Guardian* had regained its laurels. Within two years, it was back on top with a new design and format, not to mention numerous awards and accolades, including a Black Pencil at the 2006 D&AD Global Awards and a Designer of the Year nomination from the Design Museum.

Everything started in the summer of 2003 with the realisation that the traditional broadsheet newspaper was no longer a convenient format for modern life. The paper’s last major overhaul had been David Hillman’s seminal 1988 redesign, which, while brilliant, was no longer working in the 21st century. ‘What Hillman brought was a principle about how to order the information, which really changed the look of the paper, but it didn’t really question any of the basics of the journalism,’ observes Porter.

By the time Alan Rusbridger, the *Guardian*’s editor, returned from his summer holidays in 2003, changing the paper’s format was no longer simply a possibility, it was a must. ‘We looked at all the possible formats and, even back then, were interested in the Berliner,’ recalls Porter, who even began some speculative work converting the existing design into the so-called Berliner format. But, knowing there was no way they could feasibly print a Berliner on their existing presses, this was more a conceptual experiment than a real possibility. ‘Then, rather shockingly for us, that autumn the *Independent* launched its tabloid version.

We'd already started thinking about format change so to see somebody else doing it was a bit of a shock.'

Before long the *Times* had followed suit and soon both titles were dual-publishing – simultaneously producing both broadsheet and tabloid versions, based on the (not strictly true) idea that readers were getting the same paper, irrespective of their choice of format. Unable to afford the luxury of dual publishing, Porter knew that the only way to catch up quickly was for the *Guardian* to switch to tabloid too.

As the pressure to follow the crowd increased, he spent the next three months experimenting with a tabloid *Guardian*, but it soon became clear that it wasn't possible to convert a broadsheet newspaper to tabloid without radically changing both the journalism and the design. 'The idea that you could was absurd,' he says. 'It wasn't going to be that straightforward and the editor, in particular, was very concerned that if we went down that route we would be forced, even if we didn't want to, to change the journalism and the way we presented the stories.' There were also a number of technical problems with the tabloid format. For example, the *Guardian's* third section supplements were already being printed in tabloid format, and keeping the existing structure would have meant producing an excessively bulky paper of more than 200 pages, four days a week. Then there was the advertising: the change in page size and proportion was very hard to design around.

This time was not wasted, however. Investigating the change to tabloid helped Porter to understand both what he didn't want the design to be and to develop the philosophy for the eventual Berliner format. 'Part of newspaper redesign is graphics – typography, colour, grids – but a large part of it is journalism, working out how to use photography and info-graphics, how to use layouts to tell stories, working with editors about the lengths of stories and so on,' he says.

'The decision by the *Independent* and the *Times* to move to tabloid was obviously a catalyst that made us revisit our plans and we looked at a change to tabloid but we really didn't feel it did the *Guardian* justice,' says Rusbridger. The team suddenly found itself with two very different pressures. 'One was to adapt to what was going on in the market; adapt to people's reading habits and all that pointed towards reducing the size of the paper and adopting a new format. But we also had a very clear sense of ourselves, of what kind of paper we wanted to

be, and we didn't want these commercial pressures to prevent us doing the kind of journalism we wanted to do.'

This desire to stay true to principles can be traced back to the *Guardian's* roots. The paper is owned by the Scott Trust, which was established in 1932 by the same families which started the paper in 1821. The Trust's primary objective is: 'To secure the financial and editorial independence of the *Guardian* in perpetuity: as a quality national newspaper without party affiliation; remaining faithful to liberal tradition; as a profit-seeking enterprise managed in an efficient and cost-effective manner.' The *Guardian* isn't owned, like most other newspapers, by a group of shareholders out to make a profit. Of course, it must think commercially and compete in order to survive, but the paper is in the very unusual position of existing to hold true to its core journalistic principles. 'It would have been very wrong for us to react to commercial pressures in a purely commercial way,' continues Porter. 'We had, at all times, the commercial idea of what the paper needed to be but that was always balanced with the journalistic value of what the paper needed to be.'

One of the most obvious challenges for Rusbridger, and indeed everyone else involved, was the unenviable task of producing the then-current *Guardian* on a daily basis while at the same time trying to imagine it two years hence. 'There were a lot of incredibly difficult technical challenges, so I had to become an expert in printing presses and colour and so on,' he recalls. 'Then there was the decision of whether to use Mark or go to an outside firm and so on ...'

Deciding to work with Mark Porter, however, was 'not terribly hard'. 'Mark and I have been working pretty closely for a number of years and I think he's a wonderful designer, so it seemed the natural thing.' As the paper was being redesigned in-house, Rusbridger found himself fulfilling a dual role, as both 'client' and editor. However, as the decision to move to the Berliner format was made jointly with the commercial directors and the board, there was no real conflict between the between the creative and commercial sides of the paper, as Liz Folgan, chair of the Scott Trust, pointed out at the time. 'The business case was so well-made and the arguments so overwhelming, the trust was absolutely on all sides.'

But there was still one major problem. The existing presses were not suitable for printing a Berliner format. The team looked into the possibility of 'trimming down': using the existing presses and cutting off the spare paper, as is the custom

on many European papers, but this wasn't a viable solution. Instead, it was decided to replace the current presses, which were due for renewal within five years in any case, with three new presses capable of printing the new format. Although Rusbridger had previously been told it would be impossible to build new presses inside three years, MAN Roland had different ideas. The German printing firm promised to build and install the new presses within 18 months, faster than any other order in its history. Moreover, the three new state-of-the-art ColorMan presses, one in Manchester and two in east London, were to enable the *Guardian* to print in full colour on every page, a first for a UK daily newspaper. 'It was a very strange moment where we knew we had to change, we'd evolved a reasonably clear idea about what we wanted to do – but we had 18 months before the presses were going to be ready,' says Porter. 'If we hadn't been changing presses we'd have been forced to move much more quickly and wouldn't have been able to think in such a clear way. That little window of time gave us an amazing opportunity to question everything, to strip the whole paper right back down to its basics and rebuild it in a completely new form.'

The move from broadsheet to tabloid was already seeing other quality papers begin to adopt the traits of the more downmarket tabloids: the big picture on the front page, the strident tone, opinions rather than facts on the front page. All of these seemed completely alien to the *Guardian's* editorial philosophy and the paper's editorial team was determined to reinforce its position as an intelligent newspaper. 'We had a very strong sense of our own history and we wanted that to be very clear in the design, but we also had to be clear that we were at ease with modern culture and technology. And the existing design didn't really do any of those things,' says Porter.

When it came to the design process, Rusbridger was keen to involve the key members of his editorial team. 'We began with Mark and I sitting down and me talking him through the sort of paper that I wanted tonally,' says the editor. 'We also had days when we stuck lots of papers on the walls and got the heads of department over and asked them to put stickers on the ones they liked so that we got a real sense of where the immediate team was. Then Mark went away to a darkened room and came back with the sort of look he thought interpreted what I was telling him.'

This collaborative approach continued throughout the project, with Rusbridger closely involved at every stage. As the great *Guardian* editor CP Scott wrote in

his famous 1921 essay to celebrate the centenary of the *Guardian* and his 50th anniversary as editor: 'A newspaper, to be of value, should be a unity, and every part of it should equally understand and respond to the purposes and ideals which animate it. Between its two sides there should be a happy marriage, and editor and business manager should march hand in hand, the first, be it well understood, just an inch or two in advance.'

'There was a moment during the summer of 2004 where I had more or less a completely blank sheet of paper,' recalls Porter. 'I had a reasonably clear idea of what the brief was: to design a newspaper that was overtly intelligent and serious, quite restrained but also very modern and contemporary. This was one of the most high-profile newspaper design projects ever, and obviously a wonderful thing to be involved with, but also quite intimidating.'

On any given day there might be 40 or 50 people working on *Guardian* layouts, some of whom are trained designers, others who aren't. In order to make it possible for such a disparate group of people to create a newspaper every day, it is imperative to have a well-defined structure underlying the overall design.

'What I usually do with a newspaper project is to start not by trying to have big ideas about how it will look, but by looking at the technical, almost engineering aspect,' says Porter. 'A newspaper design has to be a kind of construction kit. You give people a bunch of elements that have to be rearranged in an almost infinite number of ways, but still project a consistent personality and a recognisable voice.'

For Porter, the starting point on this project was the grid. Normally, the number of columns is defined by the conventions of the advertising market, but because this was a unique format that had never previously existed in the UK, no precedent had been set. 'We decided on five columns, which is quite wide, but one of the great things about the *Guardian* is its writing and I really wanted to make reading the newspaper a pleasure.' The decision to commission a new typeface came later. 'There is something about a typeface that really establishes the personality of a publication,' notes Porter, 'so it was really important that the newspaper had an instantly recognisable voice, but one that fitted in with its new design philosophy.' After trying hundreds of typefaces and styles, none of which seemed special enough or possessed the right qualities, Porter finally chose to work with two designers. London-based Paul Barnes has a great sense of style and knowledge of typographic history, and these perfectly complemented the

skills of typeface designer Christian Schwartz from New York. The result was Guardian Egyptian. ‘Using a typeface with an extremely wide range of weights gave us the flexibility to just use one typeface throughout the whole newspaper. That is one of the things that, I think, gives the *Guardian* a very special flavour.’ The redesign was also an opportunity to completely rethink the way the editors worked. One suggestion Porter thought would help readability was to include many more short stories to balance out the longer pieces. The editors bought into this. Five or 10 years ago, readers would have spent at least an hour, maybe more, with the paper every day. It’s now necessary to create a satisfying experience for people who have just 10 minutes to spare, and one of the ways to achieve that is by offering material of different lengths. Porter was also keen to use photography and graphics in a way that was as strong and useful as the written journalism. In the past, there had been a tendency to write the story and then find a picture. With the new design, Porter was looking to create a newspaper where the pictures worked just as hard as the text, offering an alternative way for time-pressed readers to engage with the paper.

‘To redesign and completely change shape simultaneously was a very big thing to do and involved a lot of people working for about 18 months,’ concludes Rusbridger, ‘but it was actually a very collaborative and stimulating process because so many people got involved. Nobody had ever worked on anything that size before, so we went into it not really knowing how to do it, but we built up some good teams, all working around Mark at the centre.’

By staying true to core values, by resisting the urge to react too quickly to what was going on in the wider contextual arena and by working together as a team, Rusbridger and Porter have succeeded with a design that is completely in tune with the *Guardian’s* raison d’être and the reason why the Scott Trust itself was set up. ‘We’ve managed to preserve our unique tone of voice in a very pressurised environment and that’s very useful for us in terms of thinking about the future,’ says Rusbridger.

Following the launch of the new format, Michael Bierut posed the question ‘Can a newspaper be beautiful and still do hard news?’ on the Design Observer blog. ‘I think it’s a really interesting question, and I think it can, but it misses the point that newspapers are not about hard news any more,’ says Porter. ‘I get my hard news from the internet, the radio and the television. By the next day I don’t want to be told what happened yesterday, I want to have it explained to me. I want

context and analysis, and that's the kind of role that newspapers have now. In order to do those things it's very important that we make it readable, make it navigable, but use all the best principles of editorial design to try and help the reader understand and engage with what's going on.'