Taking it to the Limits

It all happened back in 1980-81. I took an awful lot of grey hairs and illness out of it, and so did all my colleagues. It's probably the hardest thing we ever did, and I honestly don't know if I'd do it again. Thinking about it again now, I realised I'd put it out of my mind all this time. I had nightmares about it last night.

The thing I'm talking about is the split from Time Out — which is the London arts and entertainment magazine, to start a new magazine called City Limits. It's not directly comparable. I don't think, with any other industrial print dispute that was happening in England around that time, there was an awful lot of upheaval just beforehand, in the very late '70s. The Times started what I now see as the whole series of dreadful strikes and mishandled disputes which finally ended up with Murdoch. Nobody at the time really realised what was going on — and I can't claim any special prescience here.

But I think at that point, probably, the owners were beginning to wriggle under the pressure of journalists doing largely as they wanted — so they, the owners, decided they were going to reimpose a kind of Beaverbrook style of management, which is to say, "you will do that", as opposed to things just happening as they would. And that moment found its logical conclusion in the Murdoch takeover of the world. It certainly contributed to the entire restructuring of the British press to the extent that when I, who've been away a year now, look at them I just do not recognise anything about them any more. And it's a really frightening sight.

The story of City Limits isn't to do with the setting-up of alternative publications as such, because we didn't all sit around one day and say, "Hey, it would be a really good idea if we did this" — we actually already had one. We had an extremely successful magazine at Time Out. It was a magazine which had been started something like ten years previously on a loan of a hundred quid from the owner's auntie, and it started in his basement. At the time, the arts and cultural scene in London was very fragmented; the fringe as such didn't exist; and you really couldn't find out what was going on. It was very like Sydney now, I find, anyway — because I never know what's going on in this damned town until it's finished.

People say you couldn't do that sort of thing here, because you don't have fringe theatre, you don't have fringe galleries, you don't have art house circuits in the same way, and so on. But you didn't in London, either; the two grew together. They actually service one another. We only realised this after the strike, that we
had this extraordinarily successful publication, which was known as alternative, radical, trendy left, and so on (and it was a bit of all those things), but which was also an extremely commercially viable one. And it was full of journalists who thought they were extremely radical, and trendy, and alternative and so on, but who also had extremely fat salaries, and thought they were really shit hot. And I was one of them, too.

But, at the same time, we'd built up a system of working which was unique. We had something which I find most people don't understand, which is to say strict parity. Everybody on the magazine was paid the same wages, whether you were the editor, the cleaner or the receptionist. It was a very good wage, which didn't hurt. So there was no such thing as a hidden pay-packet: everyone knew what everyone else got. That was one of the reasons why Tony Elliott, the owner of the magazine, actually decided to create the strike — because it really made him annoyed that he couldn't split people away from one another by paying his "stars" more than anybody else.

The magazine was also run strictly on the understanding that we would not tolerate anything that was sexist, racist, or promoted inequality. And that included advertising. We were very happy to accept advertising because it paid our salaries. I think a lot of people on the left don't realise that, in the print industry, the cover price is just a side issue — your revenue comes from advertising, and if you're going to have a successful publication, you need advertising. But we did insist that advertisers follow our code, and we refused a lot of advertising — particularly cinema advertising. And rather than the advertisers saying, pooh pooh, they'd go somewhere else, they'd actually change their advertising and they would talk about it. It actually had a real knock-out effect throughout the industry, which was quite interesting.

In fact, it was a cinema ad that precipitated the strike: it was an ad for Dressed To Kill, which showed a female figure having violence committed against her — so we refused it. Tony decided enough was enough: this was going too far. He tore up our agreement, quite literally, and said "Push off". And we naturally said, no, we didn't think this was such a good idea... We went on strike and staged a sit-in that was extremely well-publicised, because we knew how to do these things: so it was on the TV news. We were on the fifth floor of the building in Covent Garden where our very ritzy offices were, and we had the TV cameras along to see us taking up supplies on ropes and the like. We had all sorts of real tear-jerking things like parents with kids, and the kids were going "mummy, mummy" — it was really great stuff. We got the sympathy vote, and we were characterised in the media as being human beings and not loonies, because we had kids and we were acting like ordinary people, and people could identify with that.

Then we made a crucial decision — it was sheer fluke, really — to start putting out a strike paper right away. We called it Not Time Out, because there has been a very successful paper during the Times strike called Not The Times. Tony promptly took out a court order against us — we weren't allowed to use the words Time Out. So, for the coming issue, all of us sat around with black texts scribbling out Time Out, so it came out as Not. Thereafter it came out as Not, just Not, and people would ask each other "Have you got your Not?" It was a broadsheet, and we took in paid advertising from the cinemas, the galleries, the theatres, restaurants, pine bed shops, futon shops, the lot. The whole panoply of London's subculture.

That paper kept us going in more ways than one: for a start, it kept us all together. It gave us something to do, so that people didn't drift away into corners and get depressed. And it made us realise that we could do this thing by ourselves that we'd been doing, but somehow hadn't been responsible for, all this time. The advertising came in, and then we found that we had this extraordinary support from the wider community of arts and alternative people in London, and also the broad left, inasmuch as they
basement rehearsal hall, which they gave us for the duration as our headquarters. There was an extraordinary march through London, with Arthur Scargill and a lot of really famous big union boys at its head — some 20,000 people marched for a scabby bunch of journalists to get their jobs back. And so it was that some forty to fifty people were able to stay out on strike for twenty weeks and not give in, and also have their essential bills paid and have a few bob left over to be living on.

Eventually, however, it began to be clear that, not only was Tony not going to reach any agreement that didn’t involve total capitulation from all of us — but also that the length of the strike was causing the unions to start getting edgy about wanting us to settle. People were beginning to say very quietly “We think you ought to settle, I mean we’ve got a very good offer here”. But we figured that we just couldn’t turn around to all those people who’d supported us all that time and say, thank you very much, folks, but we’re not going to win, so we’re going to take our jobs back and our big fat salaries, it’s been good ... The morality of that was even beyond us.

That’s when we decided that, since we’d been running the strike paper quite happily all this time, and since it had become extremely successful, well, all right, we’d put out our own magazine instead. That was a real leap of confidence. We’d always said to one another, and to anyone else who’d listen, that our management structure was hopeless and it was actually us who put the magazine out. But there’s a big leap between that and actually saying, “Forget them, we’ll go and do it ourselves”. And that’s exactly what we decided we would do: and we’d maintain the old principles, so that it would be non-sexist, non-racist, broad left, and have equal opportunities for all.

We got a committee together of members of staff, and set about planning it, and we worked out the finances to the best of our ability. That was our biggest drawback, because we had no financial experience whatsoever. I’m glad we didn’t know then what we didn’t know, because if we had I think we would never have gone ahead and done it. People sold their houses, I sold my car, that sort of thing. We raised £80,000 among us. Then we got a loan from the Greater London Council (it was always characterised in the press as a grant) — £100,000 at 17 percent interest, which was two percent above the going rate. And then we calculated the interest payments: but we only did that afterwards, thank God.

So somehow it got off the ground. It was entirely unlike people’s preconceptions of what it was going to be. The advertising industry and the marketing industry were all saying, forget it, you’ll never get there, and anyway we don’t want a magazine from people like you. They pictured us as these leftwing loonies, and so they thought it was going to be very much as that kind of publication had come to be seen in the eyes of the public — which is to say, extremely dull, worthy and turgid. Instead, it was fun, it was stylish, it was witty, it was sharp, it was irreverent. It quickly became the thing which, if you had any pretensions at all to radical youth chic, you had to have under your arm.

The first night it hit the streets was probably one of the most exciting things I’ll ever go through. There it was, and it was a success. What we realised very quickly, however, along with the gigantic problems about revenue, was that our core audience, what was considered to be the natural leftwing core, was very small. It was too small to support us and that’s out of a population in London of eight or nine million. But they were very vocal, and very demanding, and they were very loyal. This meant, however, that all the mail that came in said “You bastards, you’ve sold us out, you’ve got advertising, you’ve got this or that, how could you?”. We’d read these and think, oh Jesus, we’re total failures. And then we realised that the people who wrote to us to tell us we were sell-out merchants really added up to about ten people. So we had to retain that core audience, but also build from it, into the wider reaches of London.

From within, we had problems arising from the fact that the magazine was solely owned by a co-op, which was solely owned by the staff. So everyone had an equal say, and if you worked there you owned it and it owned you. It was a very tight-knit and pleasant feeling. But among the staff, and thus among the owners, there were some hugely diverse opinions, and that made our success a problem — because some people actually didn’t want to be successful, they wanted to be in opposition. I think that’s a real problem on the left, because some people actually do want to be in opposition, and if you are successful, this can become a real difficulty for them.

These were some of the things that we found most difficult to solve. Another was how to stay at the top — and this entailed being completely redesigned within two years of hitting the streets, by a new designer. This was the designer I notice everybody now uses throughout the world as the trendy designer — a guy called Neville Brody, who also designed The Face.

Well, we did it, it was extremely hard, and we compromised all of the way. We still ended up with a really good product. We should have had more money: we actually ended up going for six months for no salary whatsoever, just to keep it going, back in 1981. Now the Christmas issue 1986 had 160 pages, and it’s five years old. I’m really proud to have been part of it. And I think it’s possible here, even though a lot of people would like to tell you that it isn’t.

Diana Simmonds


(This is an edited version of a talk given at a seminar on the future of the left and alternative press in Australia held in Sydney in April. We will be printing other contributions on the same subject in upcoming issues.)