



Peter Preston

Tomorrow the world? Unlikely

Since the *International Herald Tribune*, the international newspaper par excellence, has been bought by the New York Times, sales have slumped. Peter Preston analyses the international newspaper market and asks whether there is any space for an international newspaper in the digital age.

Once upon a time (12 months ago actually) the dream of a truly globalised newspaper seemed hotter and stronger than ever.

The *New York Times* had paid 65 million dollars to the *Washington Post*, and won some bad feeling and 100 per cent of the *International Herald Tribune* in return.

But who cared about a grumpy Donald Graham at the Post? Take the unique reputation of the *Trib*. Give it the undivided attention of top management and editing teams from the *Times*. Pour in cash and confidence. What could possibly go wrong?

There is, alas, no single answer to that, more a list of random woes. Faker Jayson Blair went wrong and the mother ship hit an iceberg. World advertising revenues went wrong, and a 2002 *International Herald Tribune* loss of 5m dollars doubled. Iraq went wrong and newspaper-buying tourists stayed at home – Americans in Paris, Texas. The search for a new publisher proved long, if not wrong (finally, this month, settling on Michael Golden, a conveniently close cousin of *NYT* chairman Arthur Sulzberger Jr). Plans to add sections and put colour on the front page drifted. Nothing, in short, proceeded smoothly or to schedule.

Does any of that matter? Aren't these all small problems that time and determination will sort out? That is probably so – or would be if two other wallopings weren't suddenly waxing much larger.

One is predictable enough perhaps, a name dilemma from the very start of the game. American brand images don't come more powerful than the *New York Times*, but much of its 65m dollars went on buying another dominant brand. The *International Herald Tribune* has a distinct history and reputation on its side. It isn't merely the international edition of the *Times* with a yarn or two from the *Boston Globe* added. It is – or was – 250,000 or so copies a day of something different.

Yet somehow the team toiling away in Paris haven't quite pinned down that difference. A few traditional hands, such as fashion diva Suzy Menkes, remain untouched: but too much of the comment is purely American now, too many of

the tales lifted straight from a New York or Boston front page. Europe doesn't live here any more. And, between the lines, you can feel the frustration of brand clashing with brand, of *Times'* power going to waste because it can't give the *Trib* a good old four-square shove.

What price the *International New York Times*? That would certainly make sense, but might not enthuse chairman Sulzberger's board. Why pay so much for a (loss-making) paper with a great name, then scrap it? Why not just launch your own overseas edition and go hell for leather?

But even brand perplexities pale beside the second, slowly dawning problem – one that enfolds this entire "international" sector, from *Wall Street Journal* to *Financial Times*. An awful thought. We're used to thinking that editions rolled out round the globe, skipping borders and gathering AB bankers and politicians as they go, were the gold standard of quality newspaper-making, and thus the future. But what if we're wrong? What if paper and ink churning from print rooms thousands of miles apart are the past?

Evidence from the *FT* and *Journal* is mixed, to put it mildly. The *FT*, which could look to 80m pounds profits only four years ago, is scrabbling to make any sort of money these days. A world advertising collapse borne of global uncertainty after 11 September? Possibly. Osama bin Laden isn't much of a whiz when it comes to selling corporate full-page ads. But that isn't all. Circulation at home and abroad is a grey old story for the pink one: down 3.87 per cent year on year last month, but suffering much worse than that in Fortress UK and Ireland, where just 106,118 copies were sold at full price. Its home base is crumbling – and faces many more grisly tests as rivals such as Murdoch's *Times* pile in with tabloid editions for City commuters to read on the Tube. Thank heavens, you say, for the brilliant strategy of almost a quarter of a century, the move out to Frankfurt, Hong Kong and the rest. Without that it would be *FT* nemesis for sure.

But foreign sales themselves are mysteries wrapped in enigmas, a perplexing parade of giveaways and bulks and subscriptions mixing with the pure stuff. Are they really buoyant, or flaky extrapolations of print site capabilities?

If Andrew Neil can give away 186,000 copies of the *Business* every week, why shouldn't the *FT* do a little business of its own? The *Wall Street Journal*, in another way, certainly does that. Sales up nearly 300,000 in a trice, leaping to over 2 million a day? Yes, but that's because the internet digital edition now counts towards the headline total (as sanctified by the American audit bureau). There's no need to haul tonnes of dead wood from printing works to corner stall any longer. Digital does the job for you.

Which is where, surely, these international contenders lose the plot. AB businessmen and diplomats and academics are online now, because their jobs depend on it. Their mobile phones keep them in touch. Their Palmtops pulse with information. They can read their email on the TV in their hotel room. They are on call 24 hours a day, and their employers – who buy the *WSJ* and *FT* net services anyway – like it that way. Newsprint, for such readers, is rapidly getting beside the point. If the electronic newspaper is ever going to let forests grow in peace, this is the first thicket of tranquillity.

Properly run and resourced, there's no reason why the *FT* or *Journal* should fear extinction here. On the contrary, their websites are in place precisely because they can best manage transition. But that doesn't apply for a second to

the *International Herald Tribune*. If you want to read the authentic *New York Times* or *Boston Globe*, you need only log on direct. The *Trib*, by contrast, floats in a curious limbo, neither one thing nor quite another.

It could find a unique role if it wanted. Europe as a prospective union of 25 lacks any paper that can reach its decision-makers as a chronicle of shared concern rather than 25 national viewpoints. Even the most serious papers – from *Le Monde* to *El Pais* – are journals for one country, not a continent. There is no way for this greater Europe to talk or debate with itself – especially now the *Trib* has eased away from that area. But it is – indeed, must be – an area with huge growth potential, because you can't have an ever-closer amalgamation of so many states without a matching newspaper to keep the body politic clean. Democracy can't work any other way.

There ought to be a cracking future for the *Tribune*, pole centre as the union evolves. It wouldn't, even two years ago, have required much of a tweak to go that way. But do the men from the *New York Times* see such a possibility?

Of course not. They have their own brand and patch to worry about. They paid big money, and continue to lose it. They want more of the *Times*, more of an Arts section, more finance, more sport. They want more and more. It is not an ignoble ambition. It deserves respect. But is it, 12 months on, just old hat in a brave new world?

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