

Sleeping with the enemy

John Illman

*How can a man married to the Mail run off with
The Guardian? Like this, says a man who did it*

After five years as *Daily Mail* medical correspondent I joined *The Guardian* as health editor. I was one of a number of ex-*Mail* journalists who became unwittingly embroiled in controversy after making this unlikely switch. We were accused of contaminating *The Guardian* and dragging it down market. This may seem no more than a footnote in *Guardian* history, but Ian Mayes, author of the forthcoming third volume of the paper's official history, believes it gave *The Guardian* a sharper professional edge. A former deputy editor of *G2* and more recently reader's editor, he joined *The Guardian* in 1987 and left in 2015, and had a ringside view of so-called "Maildom". He has devoted some 3,000 words to it.

The Guardian's grande dame Polly Toynbee may vehemently disagree with his conclusion. She reduced a morning conference to silence by declaring that no one who had been on the *Mail* should be allowed to work for *The Guardian*. Attendees included Emily Wilson, formerly of the *Mail*.

Toynbee highlighted the amazing depth of feeling about Maildom – amazing because it wasn't as if there was a great mass of us. We came in quietly in ones and twos. I was among the first. Our impact seems to have been out of all proportion to our number. We included Catherine Bennett, formerly *Mail on Sunday*, Stephen Bates, Sarah Boseley, Rory Carroll, Ian Cobain, Nick Hopkins, James Meikle, Steven Morris and David Munk.

I cannot speak for later arrivals, but Bates, Meikle, and I, arriving at more or less the same time, were all assumed to be committed right-wing Tories. I'd actually like to be a committed Tory or a committed socialist or

Liberal Democrat or a committed Christian. I am none of these things. I believe this has made me a better medical journalist, even though it led to people on the *Mail* to believe that I was a pink softie and those on *The Guardian* that I had capitalistic leanings and private health insurance. To put the record straight, I have never been a capitalist and have never had private health insurance despite claims to the contrary in the pilot issue of the failed *Casablanca* journal. It deserved to fail if it did not check such basic facts and formulated opinion on the basis of sloppy research – or, in my case, no research at all.

I am often asked by both journalists and non-journalists how I reconciled working for two titles at opposite ends of the political and cultural spectrum. I put myself on that part of the journalistic spectrum occupied by Thomas Fowler in Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*. Fowler, you may recall, was a British journalist in his 50s covering the French war in Vietnam. He meets a young American CIA agent Alden Pyle. After being overexposed to Pyle's naive opinionated vision, Fowler wearily declares: "Opinions are for leader writers in London."

At the risk of sounding even more pious than the *Guardianistas* who cooked up the Maildom contamination theory, I would like to say that while I lack political commitment, I have always been committed to good journalism. In my area this means using medical and health journalism to identify fact, fiction and fraud. This is far more important than the parochial consideration about whether I am working for the *Mail* or *The Guardian* or a right- or left-wing publication. In reporting health and medicine, an evidence base should trump all political considerations.

I'd never actually wanted to work for the *Mail*, while I'd always wanted to join *The Guardian*. The *Mail* asked first. Paul Dacre was genuinely incredulous when I said "no" when he asked whether I had ever wanted to be the *Mail's* medical correspondent. I have no regrets about going there. In fact, I feel indebted to the *Mail* (and *The Guardian*). I was a career journalist.

Five years on the *Mail* made me a better reporter and feature writer. I am sure other *Mail* migrants feel the same way even if from time to time, it seemed like a boot camp. An old national hack told me that within a few weeks of starting there, I'd feel 10 feet tall. He was right. I developed a completely distorted view of my own importance. Alas, for others the *Mail* was an unhappy and unforgiving place. It was also a paper I frequently disagreed with and still do –for example, in its reporting of social workers and their charges. But if I had restricted myself to titles I had no reservations

about, I would never have had a national newspaper career.

There was arguably no better place to work as a medical correspondent than the *Mail*. It devoted more space to medicine and health than other national paper out of the recognition that it had a higher female readership than any other national newspaper and that women take the lead in the home in health and medicine. Few people recognise the pioneering role the *Mail* played in integrating women into the national newspaper market. (Yes, there is an inconsistency here, as in so much of the *Mail* story. While attracting a female readership, Northcliffe took a long time to be persuaded that women merited the vote.)

There is one striking difference between the *Mail* and *Guardian* cultures. The *Mail* is top-down. *The Guardian* is bottom-up. For example, in 1983, shortly after joining the *Mail*, I met the editor, Sir David English, in the lift. He asked about my plans for the day. I told him. Thirty minutes later, Dacre, then news editor, roared: "What the hell are you doing telling the editor things before telling me?" I have never learned so much before or since from 20 seconds in a lift. But I finished the day feeling much closer to Dacre than at the beginning. He had the good grace to apologise a few hours later. We got on well thereafter. He was an outstanding news editor.

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He encouraged me to pursue exclusive front-page splashes. Go for the big ones, he said, and I'll guard your back if you miss the minnows. I had a successful run, thanks largely to a huge network of contacts I'd built up in the previous 13 years. A specialist journalist is nothing without their contact books and a platform to make use of them. There was, for me, no bigger platform than *The Mail* in the 1980s. The paper was repeatedly setting the national news agenda and I felt a part of this –sometimes I really was.

But after five years – as on local newspapers – the same jobs were coming round again and again. British Medical Association annual meetings were more riveting than flower shows, but it was time for something new. As I noted in the previous edition of the *BJR* (26:4:56-59), I also left the *Mail* after Dacre had moved to features. This was followed by a significant fall in my splash rate. The post-Dacre *Mail* news desk succumbed to the crippling malaise of ledger-book journalism in which everything, big or small, has to be ticked off, irrespective of whether it makes the paper.

I returned to freelancing. I wrote a couple of pieces for *Guardian Health*, and then, within two days, I had calls from *The Sunday Times*, which wanted a medical correspondent and *The Guardian*, which wanted a health editor. *The Guardian* was of more personal interest because although as editor of *GP*, I had been responsible for commissioning, I'd never had my own pages on a national newspaper. I wanted to be a space baron.

This was during the run-up to the launch of the tabloid *G2* in 1992. The decision by the then *Guardian* editor Peter Preston to hire staff with tabloid expertise angered both staff and readers who saw the Maildom appointments and the launch of *G2* as irrefutable evidence that the paper was dumbing down. One staffer lamented in a message to Preston that *The Guardian* had come to "a dark moment in its history".

But *The Guardian*, I believe, had to change to survive. The paper I had aspired to as a young reporter was not the paper I joined, but I doubt that *The Guardian* of the 1980s would survive for long in 2016.

As a former *Mail* journalist, did I feel as if I was going into a lion's den at *The Guardian*? No. The *Mail* had given me the confidence and competence to do my job. I felt privileged to do a job I loved. The divide between the *Mail* and *Guardian* was irrelevant to me, but it remains, it seems, as controversial as ever. I am looking forward to Ian Mayes' forthcoming history.

John Illman is a former editor of GP. He spent six years as chair of the Medical Journalists' Association. His seventh book, Handling the Media:

Communication Skills for Healthcare Professionals, will be published in April 2016 by JIC Books, £14.99

🐦 @john_illman