

James Geary's low-down on the Commentariat

It's almost like a football signing," says Michael Wolsey, comment editor for the Irish Independent in Dublin. "We're expecting reprisals." He's referring to his paper's recent poaching of a top columnist from the Irish Times, and his expectation that the Times will start raiding the Independent's commentators in return. Bidding wars for comment and opinion writers are nothing new. But as newspapers battle for readership, the strategy seems to be – the paper with the best columnists wins. Is that how comment editors see things, too?

Wolsey cites the usual suspects – the Web, TV, radio, mobile technology – for pushing papers away from straightforward news and more toward opinion. "We're not instant reporters of news anymore," he says. "Comment is replacing that." For Wolsey, though, the best commentators need to be more than simply provocative and entertaining. "They must also bring a depth of knowledge and expertise to their subject," he says. "People will be willing to pay for the wisdom of commentators like that."

Whether people will pay for their favourite columnists is still an open question. Last fall, the New York Times launched TimesSelect, an online service that offered access to the paper's columnists (Maureen Dowd, Thomas Friedman, et al.) and some other Web-only extras for \$7.95 a month. As of the beginning of June, TimesSelect had just over 480,000 subscribers, more than 60% of whom received the service for free along with their subscription to the print version of the newspaper. The Guardian has pursued a different strategy. Its recently launched 'Comment Is Free' site is, well, free and includes exclusive online contributions from its opinion writers. The New York Times is hoping the additional revenue will make up for the loss of influence that's sure to result from the invisibility of its top op-ed writers to the overwhelming majority of Web readers. The Guardian is doing the reverse: it's betting that buzz from the Comment Is Free site will eventually rub off financially on the newspaper proper. What both strategies have in common is this: Comment is the draw.

"A good commentator is worth their weight in gold," says Barbara Gunnell, comment editor for The Observer. "They bring fantastic experience to whatever subject they are writing about. Whether you agree with them or not, you know they are not going to let you

down on the facts. It's like watching a football match on television. You already know the score, but you still can't wait to read what the commentators have to say about it the next day. It's the same with politics."

And with business. The Financial Times faces the same challenges as other papers – business news has become just as much a commodity as regular news, if not more so – but its status as one of the must-reads for the financial sector gives it a competitive advantage. According to Gwen Robinson, the FT's comment editor, commentators are key to maintaining that edge. "There's probably not another Martin Wolf or Lucy Kellaway in the world," she says. "People turn to Wolf for an interpretation of economics they can trust, and to Kellaway for a laugh and to get a straight take on management they can't get anywhere else."

But is incisive comment enough to keep readers informed and engaged? Michael Oreskes, executive editor of the International Herald Tribune in Paris, argues that "analytic journalism" is the corollary of comment. "Commentary has become an increasingly important part of the package," Oreskes says. "The reason for this is not that audiences crave opinion as such; it is because in a world awash in information, readers are searching for meaning. Real value lies in giving readers the facts plus the history, background and context to help them make sense of those facts. Opinion pieces are one way to do this. But just as important are pieces of analysis, judgment and even well-written news stories that don't tell readers what to think but allow them to see the world for themselves."

Thanks to the Web, the whole world is talking, with commentators – on blogs and through established news organizations – raising some of the most distinctive voices. The conversation looks set to get a lot more interesting.

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