

SEMPER (1978) and TIME OFF (1979): EDITORIAL DREAMINGS ON CAMPUS

'Taking to the news stands – and not just the streets'

In 1978, the University of Queensland Union's long running newspaper *Semper Floreat* - or *Semper* as it was known that year - experienced success when more widely distributed on an *off campus basis*, as well as *on campus*.

This was achieved by selling the paper directly to the public through Brisbane and SE Queensland's extensive network of newsagents. (The first time this had happened since 1969 with *Semper* editor Michael Kelly's absolutely groundbreaking & 'tuned in' countercultural editions.)

The key factor that made this off-campus distribution initiative at all possible was the highly competitive price offered for its printing that year by a web offset printer on the Sunshine Coast.

At very little additional cost, a few thousand 'run on' copies were able to be provided, thereby opening up the opportunity for Brisbane residents to purchase and read it ... as well as its normal student and staff readership - who as always, received it free.

'What the!?'

The sales resulting, and positive feedback gained, greatly encouraged the UQ Union Executive and *Semper's* editorial team. Apparently at one stage, in some of the participating newsagency outlets, *Semper* actually sold more copies than the *National Times* ... although it should be noted that it was selling for less, at a cover price of only 25 cents per copy.

The editorial approach adopted for the paper that year had also proved very popular (it was visibly 'in demand' when released on campus) with its primary student and staff readership.

'A return to larrikin journalism & satire'

This editorial approach included a very strong emphasis on its own brand of larrikin journalism, a return to *Semper's* former focus on satire and student humour and the publishing of a ton of great visual material - specifically photos and multiple original cartoons and striking graphic designs by legendary staffer Matt Mawson, as well as other talented home grown artists & designers. These provided excellent balance for the entertaining articles, media critiques, fiction and a diversity of film, theatre, food, music and concert reviews supplied by a gaggle of accomplished regular contributors.

'Stories needing to be told'

The political content & commentary was at times provocative ... and fearless ... covering anything from news and analysis concerning the latest outrages of the authoritarian Bjelke Peterson government, to why the factions then controlling the State's Opposition Labor Party were literally 'pissing away' the chance to be a serious alternative party of choice for many voters.

A major feature article was published (with photos - thereby reversing the normal process) on Queensland's infamous Special Branch police - key players in Premier Joh Bjelke Peterson's politicization of the police force. The story highlighted the ways that the Special Branch was used to help suppress free speech and overzealously spy on and collect personal information on Queensland's citizens and students, whose only crime was opposing the government's outrageous abuses of power and contempt for basic democratic principles. (And predictably, no such exposes and news stories were being run by Queensland's 'see no evil' mainstream press at the time.)

At the opposite end of the spectrum, *Semper's* staff writers also questioned the mindlessness and pathetic antics then being engaged in by some of the Brisbane punk scene's infamous publicity seekers, who amongst other masochistic practices had a history of trashing music

venues (causing some to be shut down thereby denying themselves & others the chance to hear some great live music). Looking for any real meaning in all this was stupid and *Semper* made this clear - essentially spoiled Queensland middleclass kids with down and out UK working class aspirations.

'Student newspaper links with 4ZZZ'

By year's end, *Semper's* growing professionalism and rising popularity with its expanded audience led to a new phase in its attempts to see if a new and even bolder campus and community publishing and distribution strategy could be pursued for the UQU paper. Again, under the direction of its successfully reelected editorial team - who now comprised a two-time previous editor of *Semper Floreat* ... and veteran, along with several other leading members of the editorial team, of the 1975 on-campus launch of independent radio station 4ZZ. (Two of the editors, along with a regular *Semper* freelance contributor, had pioneered the services provided by that station's radio news team.)

'Time Off born'

So in 1979, under a new and more accessible masthead and name, **'Time Off'** was launched with an even more ambitious (and more costly) format. The early issues, featuring this new glossy covered, magazine format (like London's popular 'Time Out'), ran for over 60 pages ... at the increased cover price of 60 cents (but still free on campus). *Time Off* also gained the valuable input of some fresh and hard working journalistic talent and production staff.

'Seeking a new, community-based independent media model'

The *Time Off* editorial team now wanted to explore, to an even deeper level, the possibilities for the campus paper trail blazing a new (small scale) independent media model ... as had also occurred with the then visionary concept developed for independent radio through 4ZZ (*later 4ZZZ-FM*) by its indefatigable founders. An interesting precedent existed in the USA, where there was a history of the college papers in some university towns having *not* limited their readership to just the campus ... but instead developing a much wider community readership and becoming (defacto) a valued town paper as well. Journalism courses - and students gaining hands on experience - may have provided the backbone & means in many instances, but the concept of providing alternative news and content to those interested in the wider community, as well as its traditional campus readers, was also now looking promising at the University of Queensland, given the recent *Semper* experience and the parallel (but smaller scale) model it had come to represent.

'Breaking free of narrow editorial & reader notions'

With both *Semper* and *Time Off*, the focus was being fundamentally placed on creating a publication that had a lively cultural, social and political content of a kind that would potentially interest all readers. The editorial view was that students were just as keen to read a paper with higher quality and more diverse alternative content of this type as anyone - including the wider community - would be. Filling the paper with strictly 'campus' news only would never create the levels of interest that this more accurate and universal understanding of readers' interests (then largely uncatered for) would see.

'Giving readers a cultural edge ... and their home town a nudge'

(By way of example, *Semper* and *Time Off* were the first to provide comprehensive what's on guides to new happenings around Brisbane - a city serving as the University's home and a place that for many years students and others had found to be culturally limited - even boring - and lacking in the options offered elsewhere in more cosmopolitan Sydney and Melbourne. Part of this editorial coverage included tracking down and reviewing in frank & honest fashion the new affordable (i.e. 'student-priced') restaurants offering a variety of different cuisines, that again Brisbane had long been in need of. This content and other cultural news and review pages, because of their particular personal relevance and timeliness, proved highly popular with students

... and Brisbane readers at large. Then there was the independent/alternative perspective and news stories - some picked up by the mainstream media - on Queensland politics that the papers both ran. Plus original, investigative stories and then such *unanticipated* content as an insider's guide to the Mt Isa Rodeo.)

'A more comprehensive and intensive approach'

Basically, the more finely tuned vision developed by the team for *Time Off* was for it to in a more comprehensive way serve as an independently voiced, *cultural magazine* of genuine relevance and interest to UQ students and again, those amongst the SE Queensland community wanting to read about new happenings in Brisbane and surrounds, while accessing an interesting range of alternative perspectives. They could come to count on the fact that *Time Off* would move them as readers beyond the more conventional lifestyle and interests that were then receiving mainstream media coverage elsewhere around the city.

'Lacking the Murdoch and Packer billions'

As indicated earlier, financially the off campus newsagencies' sales circulation may have reached into the thousands for some issues, but with half or more of this low cover price of 25 cents (for *Semper*) and just over double that for *Time Off*, going to Gordon and Gotch (the monopolistic distributors of the time), it was hard to recover much in the way of meaningful revenues. An aspiration with *Time Off* has also been to use the far more professional looking end product it had become ... as reflected in the high quality and on the whole original (not plagiarised), cartoons, entertainment guide, photos, news stories, *humour & satire*, reviews and articles ... *to build a wider and more motivated readership and attract a far greater amount of advertising.*

'The end is nigh'

However the facts again speak for themselves and the results here did not meet estimates nor occur to the levels necessary for success ... and the overdepleted budgets available for printing and covering all operating overheads, including staff payments (most of whom were now recognized by the AJA as professional freelancers), suffered accordingly. The number of editions for the year had to be consequently cut short.

'Ratbags and Radicals?'

In terms of extracting some financial lessons, possibly the many editorial changes for the better may not have been adequately understood by potential advertisers. Some, when approached, may have still possessed - for better or for worse - mental images of 'ratbag university students' and 'radical student papers'. While others (if they weren't able to be convinced otherwise), may simply have determined that the publications' readership would not necessarily be a good target market for what they might wish to advertise.

'Too much, too soon?'

Overall, *Time Off* itself had certainly attained some new heights in terms of favourable reader comment and public & campus response, but sadly had also seemed to have reached a threshold beyond which it could not easily move. The soon to follow dramatic cultural awakening of Brisbane, that is nowadays so much a 'taken for granted', vibrant feature of the city's life, certainly suggests that it was an idea a little ahead of its time. But on the other hand, *Time Off* - like *4ZZZ* - had more than likely made its own valuable contribution to this process of change (as had been so strongly desired). The possibility exists as well, that its predecessor, the cheaper and brassier *Semper* of 1978, may in retrospect have been closer to correctly reading & meeting its readerships' immediate needs and the era's limitations.

'Positive intentions – moving towards a new Queensland'

Nonetheless, the whole *Time Off* episode was undoubtedly a highly worthy experiment for many of the reasons stated - especially its central desire (like *Semper*) to help actively foster in highly

readable fashion the cultural growth and development of the city and campus in a fresh, optimistic and anything but 'Deep North' way!

As the inaugural, newsagency edition's editorial stated - "*Our policy is to promote in a positive manner all initiatives which improve the quality of life for Queenslanders, yet we will not shy away from constructively criticizing any activities which we consider not to be in the public interest ... Through reading Time Off (Brisbane's only mass circulation, non profit, community magazine) we hope you will become more aware of the diversity of life offering in S.E. Queensland, and as a result become more tolerant and appreciative of the social outlooks of both young and old, straight and gay, city and country, conservative and radical.*"

'Moving beyond knee jerk predictability – towards inclusiveness'

Semper in 1978, and the inaugural editions of *Time Off* in 1979, had definitely moved far beyond the left wing predictability and strongly political, if not 'knee jerk' tone of some campus papers. Instead, they had as a matter of editorial policy, replaced it with a more open-minded, cultural and community focused journalism offering alternative perspectives and encouraging genuine differences of opinion. After seeing some of the finished editions, and aware of its relatively miniscule resources (compared to the media world's big players), a somewhat surprised Phillip Adams at the time described *Time Off* as an 'astonishing achievement'.

'50 years of achievement by one of Australia's best student papers'

In 1980 - following this bold experiment with *Time Off*, which it should be stressed had on the whole been very nobly and actively supported by the UQ Union (largely in recognition of the earlier success of the editorial team with *Semper* in 1978) - the decision was made by the Union for entirely sensible budgetary reasons to have *Semper Floreat* returned to its old format and approach. And for the record, it would go on to impressively celebrate its fiftieth anniversary several years later, along with the nation's most important broadcasting network - the Australian Broadcasting Corporation/Commission.

'The other Time Off – streetwise and no longer an advertising free zone'

Meanwhile (I was no longer personally associated with the magazine at this stage), one of the surviving editorial team on *Time Off*, in partnership with an interested investor, relaunched the publication off campus ... in a different format and with fewer pages as a free and independently distributed tabloid entertainment guide and 'streetmag'.

Although equally tough to sustain at first, this difference in approach (and its easier and wider availability, along with a highly active sales team) ultimately attracted advertisers. And over subsequent years, severed of its links with the campus, the reborn '*Time Off*' became something of a Brisbane 'institution', providing readers with the basic content and formula that has proved so successful in similar ventures launched in many other cities around the world.

'Since then - a new century offers the potential for radical new dreamings'

Nowadays even free papers like *Time Off* are increasingly under threat from the dramatic changes in personal information gathering & communication habits flowing from the internet and related technological innovations. Distribution opportunities have also been totally revolutionized – essentially making nonsense of former debates over the benefits of making student newspapers available 'off campus' as well as on!

- Bruce Dickson, 1978 and 1979 Editorial Team