

## the press conference with FELIX DENNIS

Felix Dennis cuts quite a figure as he waddles up to greet me in his high oak-beamed pool house. There's all that mad hair, wire-wool beard and those uneven eyes further distorted behind horn-rimmed round bifocals. His basic grey Nike joggers are tucked into furry Ugg boots and an oversized white polo top hangs loose over a proud bloat of good living. Printed on the back in big silver caps is FELIX. As if there could be any doubt. So short and hairy, he looks like an extra in *Lord of the Rings*, chilling out before slipping into battle costume.

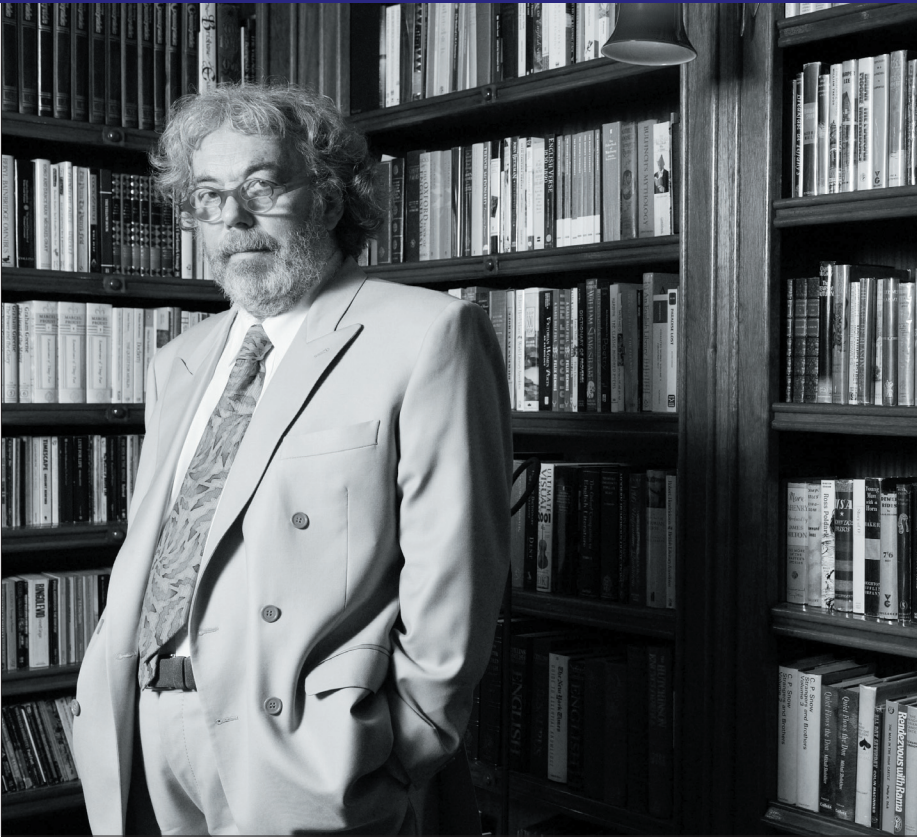
Dennis is at number 84 with £715 million in the *Sunday Times* Rich List, but the maverick magazine publisher of *Maxim*, *The Week* and many other titles is not sure of the numbers. He says it's too difficult to count accurately, but he puts it somewhere between £215m and £483m net.

I follow the silver lettering across a deep pile lawn, through the Japanese garden to two wicker chairs beneath an apple tree. Beyond the perimeter hedges are 4,500 acres of his land. The house, outside Stratford-upon-Avon, is an extended thatched cottage and is one of his five homes around the world.

We settle in to talk and I am still there FOUR hours later. Staff come and go — gardeners, PAs, a security man doing his rounds. We go through tea, homemade pork pie, sandwiches and lemon cake before moving on to some fine Pouilly Fume.

Few interviewees are as entertaining as Dennis. He's 59 now and these days he's as much a prolific poet as a ruthless businessman. He swears and laughs easily and loudly, and fizzies with the energy and wild enthusiasm of a teenager. Eccentric, brash, irreverent and touchingly avuncular, there is enough colour during an audience with Dennis to fill a bumper edition of *Maxim*, let alone a pesky standfirst of this size.

**Felix, why don't we start with British newspapers. What do you think of them generally?**  
What has happened to newspapers in Britain is a tragedy — there's no question about it. It is one thing for me to publish *Maxim* in Uzbekistan — that is just entertainment, stupidity and fun — but a newspaper is supposed to be more than just money-getting. Owning a newspaper and having that power comes with an element of public service, but any sense of that is decreasing by the day. Many newspapers have



become nothing more than ad-gets. Now, I don't blame anybody for wanting to make money, but when you buy a national newspaper, responsibilities come along with it.  
I must insist you make your readers aware that I blame no one for this. I do not blame Rupert Murdoch for what he has done to British newspapers. He is one of the cleverest and most entertaining men I have met, but *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* have declined under his stewardship and it is very sad to see. And I do not blame Richard Desmond for taking advantage in the way that he did. Good luck to him. He is a clever scallywag. But we have laws that decide who should own newspapers. Can you tell me why those laws are not enforced?  
The only way proprietors can make a lot of money is to denigrate the very product that made them rich in the first place. They denigrate it and crush it and print a lot more crap. And when they talk about their readers, they talk in the way people who make cigarettes talk about the idiots who smoke. The decline in the accuracy of news reported in the broadsheets has been absolutely dramatic. We expect nothing of the red-top tabloids. They are there merely to tell us if David Beckham has put a ring in his penis. They are an entertainment medium and any fool who believes a word they read in a tabloid deserves everything they get.

**"Journalists are idle. They make a few calls, interrogate a few contacts, write a story, go out for some free lunches, then like to get patted on the back for a great scoop"**

Portrait  
Phil Adams

Newspapers are used relentlessly and ruthlessly as the political arm of their owners. The amount of political bias and editorialising which masquerades as news has reached crisis proportions in newspapers, but no one cares as long as they sell more ads. They are making loads of money, so screw you. In the long run, it is all counter to our best interests as citizens and as media owners. Can I tell it to you any more plainly than that?

**Blimey! Is there a reason why you haven't gone into newspapers?**  
Quite simply, I am just too busy making plenty of money and spending it. And basically, compared with many people, I am idle and my work rate isn't what it should be. Look, I am sitting here wasting time giving you an interview, aren't I? I can assure you that if you were interviewing Rupert Murdoch, your time would already be up and he would be on the phone to 14 people. I know I shouldn't be sitting here doing this. My betters in the media business would certainly not do it, but then I have a thing called a life. I write poetry for three hours a day. I am busy planting England's first broadleaf forest for hundreds of years, so that means I do not make as much money as I should, but I am happier for it. I am still besotted with business and I could never retire. What is retirement to guys like me except just a living death?

Every headline in the poem was taken from British tabloid newspapers, with the exception of the first, which comes from New York City

### FELIX'S NEWS SCHEDULE

#### Newspapers

I get *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian* and one red top wherever I am in the world. Even when I am on Mustique, there's this guy who prints them out and it arrives in one great chunk of paper. He's got a stapler that could fix a vampire into his grave. I am a newspaper junkie, but I would never allow myself more than half an hour to go through the papers. Forty minutes tops. *The Telegraph* used to be the best newsgathering source in England, but it is becoming a rag at an alarming rate and it is very sad. *The Times* became a rag a long time ago, but the *Telegraph* was always an oasis of sanity in the broadsheets. Now it's not far behind. I admire *The Guardian* and *The Independent* for sticking to their guns. They have truly held the line and have gone from being seen as lame ducks to being the few sources I can truly trust that come to me as ink on dead trees. Jolly good luck to them. There is a slight renaissance in *The Observer*, but I lost all hope for *The Sunday Times* long ago.

#### Magazines

I subscribe to literally scores of magazines. There are fantastic magazines out there and you will find at least 30 or 40 in every kitchen I own in the world. Narrowing it down, *The Week* would be number one. If I was only allowed to read only one thing, it would be that. *The New Scientist* would be number two.

#### How about the commercial outlook for newspapers — what do you think the future holds?

The British newspaper model will survive as a commercial entity because there are always enough cretins who want to find out if Rebekah has been beating her husband with an iron plank lately. Frankly, I don't care if Rebekah beats her husband. What consenting adults do in their own home is their business, but millions of people want to know that nonsense, so newspapers will survive in the grip of celebrity culture. I am not as gloomy as some people about the fate of newspapers. There will be closures and consolidation. But whatever happens, political correctness and celebrity culture will be the death of us all.

#### What do you think lays ahead for the magazine business with the competition from the internet and new media?

Magazines are still growing well, so they won't die, but the landscape will look very different in 15 to 20 years. There will be much fewer magazines and many will migrate entirely to a digital environment. Women's magazines will always be here and weekly magazines will do better than monthlies. Sales for those that are left will decline, but they will find ways of surviving. It is amusing what survives in the face of emerging technologies. Cars didn't knock out horses — millions of people still ride horses. Radio didn't knock out newspapers. TV didn't knock out radio.



How I wish they would sell me that — it is magnificent — but it is owned by a corporation that doesn't need the money and I haven't got enough anyway. I enjoy *The Economist* and I love *Private Eye*. I think it is one of the best magazines in the world. End. Period. Where would we be in Britain without *Private Eye*? Its lance skewers the immensely rich, arrogant powerful and corrupt. I get lots of copies sent over to Mustique to annoy the rich homeowners.

#### Web



There isn't anywhere I live on the web. I am on the BBC Worldwide site at least once a day and I look at bbc.co.uk just to check the weather. *The Guardian* site is cool and I check a lot of business sites. I am away about seven to eight months a year and I have about nine different computers and laptops in different places. I have a guy who travels round the world making sure they are all updated and have the same stuff on.

#### You allude to your wild times in your new book. What quantities of cocaine and prostitutes were you getting through at the height of those debauchery years? Can you give me some stats?

NO! I won't give you any fucking stats! Of course, it is fascinating for you, because you are a journalist who has been taught in the ways of aiming straight for a prurient bull's eye. You think more people will read your trash with the more prurience you put in it. The sad and terrible thing is you are right! But why should I give you the satisfaction? Let's just say I would probably be £100m to £150m richer if I had not gone off the deep end. That's a lot of girls! And I am not proud of it. It was a fucking stupid thing to do and it damaged my health and screwed up my relations with a lot of people, who had my best interests at heart. It was not clever. It was really dumb and I am glad I stopped, but I can't deny it was wonderful to do it. Everyone who gets rich is going to do it. It's all the gold taps in bathrooms, huge cars, homes all over the bloody world. It's private jets, drugs, getting your dick sucked. Believe me, if you get really wealthy you are going to do all that nonsense and my advice is: Get it out of your system as quickly as you can.

#### What was the all-time greatest night during that period? There must have been a peak during the madness when you thought: 'Yeah, this is IT!'

Ha! They weren't any good unless they lasted for at least three days at a time, but I AM NOT GOING TO TELL YOU! I am not here to make anyone else miserable and I am not going to make myself miserable by dredging it all up. It was morose. I went much further than many other people and I should have stopped a lot earlier. [He blazed roughly seven years from 1988 to 1995.] I'm cross with myself for having fallen into that bear trap. I am bright enough to have avoided it, but like the rest of us I haven't got sufficient willpower.

#### How important has the poetry been to turning your life around?

Well, it means I don't sit around thinking about \$10,000-a-night whores and buckets full of crack cocaine because I am trying to write a sestina — an incredibly difficult verse form invented by the French in the 16th century. I love doing the poetry, getting it published and I love the tours and performing it live. And the royalties pay the odd lunch bill.

#### Do you mind me asking why you have never married?

You're joking, right? Are you a heterosexual male, Rob? Well, if you are, then you are not quite as silly as I thought you were 15 seconds ago. Don't be silly, I have got a companion these days [Marie-France] who has been with me quite a long time. She has been interviewed and when asked why she ended up living



with me and not any of the other girls, she said: "I waited until they left" and then gave a big Gallic shrug. That was a great answer.  
I doubt that I will ever get married. You get spoilt living entirely on your own and not having to consult your other half. I love the idea, the impression, that I have freedom, but how much I actually exercise it is quite another matter. I can ask Caroline [his main PA] to get me a Gultstream for tomorrow and then go anywhere and do anything I want and no one can ask what I am up to. How great is that?

#### What is your view of journalists?

Let's be real here, they're pond life. We're all pond life. I have employed hundreds of them, so I know journalists well. The people I have met in the media business — not just journalists — are witter, more cynical, more amusing than any other group of people I can imagine in any business. I think it is a fantastic business to have spent my working life in and I am very happy to be a small part of it. You should understand that I love my industry, even the bad stuff. Anybody who doesn't have a good time in the media business is either incompetent or has no sense of humour whatsoever. It is hilarious and when you journalists are waking up all miserable and grumpy, just imagine if you were waking up to work in the fucking supermarket laughs!

#### There is great upheaval in the newspaper and magazine businesses at the moment and a certain fear about new media among many journalists. What is your take on it all?

There is a huge depression among journalists and they have every right to be fearful, because it is all change and it's really important to be somewhere else when the music stops. But journalists are the foundation talent of the media business — no question — so I can't imagine why so many journalists are depressed. If newspapers, magazines and websites are not interesting to the point where they become mildly addictive, which is all down to journalists, then none of the other talent can do its job. As a proprietor, journalists are always going to be in business because somebody has to provide the content, so why are they so fearful and disgruntled? The truth of the matter is that journalists are by and large very idle. They like to make a few telephone calls, interrogate a few contacts, write a story, go out for some free lunches, then get patted on the back for a great scoop.

Many ink-on-paper journalists do not wish to fraternise with their electronic brethren, but why don't they just embrace change rather than playing the role of the cynical and grumpy old man? Remain cynical if you wish, but can we dispense with this grumpy nonsense. You are living in incredibly exciting times. All the bulls are juggling up in the air, all the sacred cows seem to have terminal diseases. I love these times, they are absolutely wonderful. They are dangerous and distressing, but they offer huge opportunities for people with courage. They will sort the sheep from the goats. Mighty empires will fall. Indeed, they are falling. Technology is going to kill many beasts, but it is going to create many new beasts and all these beasts require content and you journalists are content providers so why not go for it. God, I wish I was 25 years old again — I would hammer it!

#### And if you were 25 again, Felix, just think of all those women and mad times ahead of you...

Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

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