

PROFILE

Inside Wade

The phone rings and the editor of *Press Gazette* asks: "How do fancy writing a profile of Rebekah Wade. It's her fifth anniversary as editor."

My instinctive reaction probably speaks volumes – a comically loud intake of breath is followed by: "Hmm. Sounds dangerous."

Call me reckless, but I accept. My first few phone calls reveal a distinct pattern. There are plenty of amused "Ooohs" and general "rather you than me, mate" exchanges. I soon realise it's probably a thankless commission. I'll be damned by you lot if I don't nail her to the wall and I will certainly be damned by her, and unimaginable powers that be, if I do.

If I may bastardise one of Wade's better headlines while editing the *Current Bun*: "How do you write about a girl like Rebekah without causing a problem for your career?" Well, I'll just shoot for some well-sourced balance and honesty.

I need to mention up front that I know Wade. We kiss-kiss hello in that showbizzy style at dos, but, when it comes down to it, I don't really know her at all. Out of all the editors I know and have known in the past, she's the one I know least, but that is mainly down to my groove of freelancing in recent years (er, let's call it intermittent).

That said, I do know people in her inner-loop very well, and plenty of her contemporaries, both at *The Sun* and outside, so for this exercise I got good access. Not surprisingly, all her critics spoke off the record, but so did some of her closest mates, except Piers Morgan, to avoid looking sycophantic. Taking the impartial middle ground is Roy Greenslade of *The Guardian*.

Wade famously doesn't do interviews, which has led to a cartoon-like image scripted by media diaries and *Private Eye*. Scribble down now what you consider her to be, and I bet it will include some of the following – champion networker, fiercely ambitious, vile temper, ruthless bitch, not afraid to biff a bloke, bit scary, big red hair. But what is she really like, and how has she fared as editor?

"She has an enduring grievance that *The Sun* doesn't receive more credit for its endeavours"

On the business side, *The Sun's* sales dipped below three million in December for the first time since 1974. Although significant, this landmark is probably not that sensational. December is traditionally bad for papers, and *The Sun* will bounce back to nearer 3.18 million for January. But is the circulation decline down to her, or the market? I think everyone – Rupert Murdoch included – accepts it's the latter.

Greenslade – and others – say that Wade's circulation performance should be judged alongside

As *Sun* editor Rebekah Wade marks five years in the paper's hot seat, **Rob McGibbon** talks to her friends and peers in a bid to discover the woman behind the headlines, and gauge her impact on Britain's best-selling daily



the comparative losses of her current competitors, and in that context she has done well. "I think she has managed decline elegantly," concedes Greenslade. And Morgan adds: "I think any other editor would have lost more during this time. Murdoch believes this, which is why she is still in the job."

But does someone like Greenslade rate her as an editor? "Yes I do," he says. "She has done a good all-round job, and I believe she has been – and continues to be – the right editor for *The Sun* at this time. She is far better than David Yelland, but it is pointless trying to compare her to Kelvin

MacKenzie or Stuart Higgins. They operated in different climates and were in a bull market for newspapers, whereas Wade has been in a bear market."

But how has she scored on aspects everyone expects from *The Sun*, such as campaigns and breaking stories? Campaigns are, apparently, what excite her most, and she has fought solidly on many fronts, including Abu Hamzer, domestic violence, and anti-Europe. Scoop-wise: The Hutton leak was a belter, as was Prince Harry in the Nazi uniform and the Iraq friendly fire story. There has been a steady stream of good "beats", but arch-rival *The Mirror*

caned her with cocaine Kate Moss and John Prescott's affair – the humdinger that will always haunt Wade.

A recurring dig in the media pages and privately has always been Wade's editing style and her energy for networking. One detractor says: "She is a distant figure to the staff. She's hardly ever on the newsroom floor, or on the backbench, which is where most tabloid editors should be."

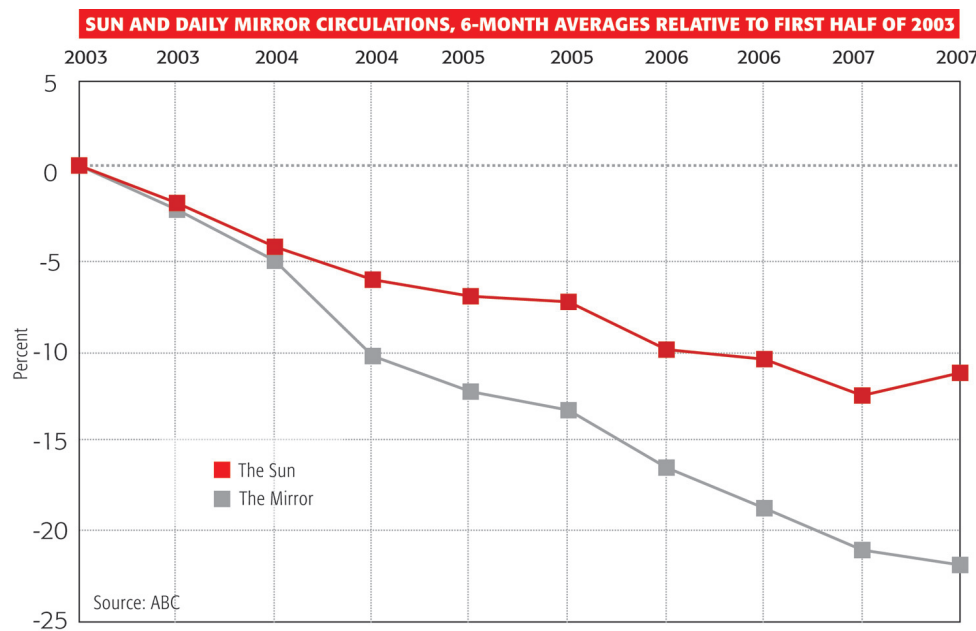
"She hides herself away in her office and never instructs reporters directly. This leaves a power vacuum, which means other executives fight for control and the paper drifts and has no personality. The staff think she is more concerned with going out schmoozing."

Ouch! Others confirm Wade's reluctance to stomp around the newsroom, but any personal antipathy doesn't seem to spread far. Saying she is holed up like, say Yelland was, is wide of the mark, although there is an "inner-circle". The office is more open plan now – under her insistence – and she personally briefs all senior reporters in all departments, often with stories she has brought in.

Staff speak of her genuine commitment to *The Sun* and loyalty to the team. She has an enduring grievance that the paper doesn't receive more credit for its endeavours. Hacks say she is "composed, even-handed and always sharp and upbeat" in news and features conferences. And she is not so aloof as to be beyond banter. Certain executives call her "TT", for Titian Tyrant, or "Red Cloud" to her face – although they pick their moment carefully. "Yes, she loses her rag, but which editor doesn't?" says one journalist.

People also say that she bounced back from her lowest moment – when she was arrested for that "domestic" with then-husband Ross Kemp in November 2005 – with commendably good humour. "She accepts why the media village loved it and doesn't think she has any right to be thin-skinned," says one *Sun* journalist.

But what of *The Sun's* personality? Generally, people agree that her paper has more sense of fun, balls and irreverence than it ever did in the humourless Yelland years. Certainly, Piers Morgan is quick to stamp on criticisms of Wade's style and work ethic. He says: "Most of these people who whinge about her office style are men – mainly old – who don't like taking orders from a woman. She inherited what was essentially a misogynistic office, but



Putting the breaks on: Wade has kept hold of a large proportion of readers than *The Mirror*



Hutton Report leaked, 28 January, 2004
On the eve of the publication of the top secret Hutton Report on the death of Dr David Kelly, *The Sun* political editor Trevor Kavanagh somehow got hold of a copy. It won Kavanagh Reporter of the Year in the 2005 British Press Awards, and Front Page of the Year for *The Sun*.



Band Aid 20 and Live 8
The Sun's Band Aid 20 campaign began with reporter Oliver Harvey going to Ethiopia for the 20th anniversary of the original Band Aid single, and culminated in a re-release of the million-selling Christmas single in 2005. *The Sun* was then closely involved with the organisation of the Live 8 concert in July 2006.



Harry the Nazi 13 Jan 2005
This exclusive proved embarrassing for Prince Harry when it showed him dressing up as a member of Hitler's Afrika Corps for a colonial-themed fancy dress party.



Tyrant's in his pants 20 May, 2005
This front page prompted legal threats from the former Iraqi dictator's lawyers. *The Sun* gave them short shrift.



God dammit, we're in jail dude 6 February 2006
This splash from February last year tied in with a website broadcast of the incredible tape in which US pilots admitted killing British soldier Matty Hull in a "friendly fire" incident. One of them is heard on the tape saying: "We're in jail dude".

de's world

she has fought against that well. People seem to forget that she is the first woman to do this job. That alone is an incredible achievement.

"It is also complete bollocks that Rebekah is work-shy. I haven't seen anyone edit the paper more diligently – she lives it seven days a week. People slag her off for networking – but isn't that what *all* journalists do? You work your contacts.

"Most of the rich and powerful people she knows would rather swim in boiling oil than talk to *The Sun*, but by some miracle she wins them round. That is an incredibly thin tightrope to walk, and is of far greater benefit to *The Sun* than tying herself to the backbench. I think that all the criticisms of Rebekah could equally be seen as strengths. She is a tough and energetic, well-connected editor who has made *The Sun* highly readable, as well as less sexist, less racist, and warmer. She has done well."

But what of

Wade the person? She's a psychotically ambitious, ruthless bitch, right? Sorry to disappoint you, but it appears not. ("Wade Not a Bitch" – it wouldn't make *The Sun*, would it?). Yes, she is driven, but she doesn't tread over people. Every female Fleet Street columnist has her template rejoinder for successful women being castigated as bitches, while their male equivalents are championed for being bastards. They can't all be wrong, can they? No one I spoke to, not even her detractors, think of Wade as a bitch. Maybe we'll just have to accept she is not one, then? Apologies.

"As much as people want to think of her as a hard-headed bitch, I don't think she is at all," says Greenslade. "It is a convenient image. She's tough, for sure, but she's not ruthless. She's also incredibly open and always takes

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Roy Greenslade, *The Guardian*

people into her confidence, which wins them over quickly."

Wade's closest circle talk of her as a thoughtful and loyal friend who is always there for people when it matters. She is not afraid to show her vulnerable side, not least since her split from Kemp, which is now heading to an "amicable" divorce. One recurring observation is that she is a touch too married to her job and is constantly "twitchy", BlackBerry in hand, with the stress of staying on red alert. "I defy anyone who gets to know Rebekah not to like her. She is charming, genuine and great fun," says Morgan.

There is always some talk about where Wade will go next. Murdoch and Les Hinton will probably decide that, not her. She laughed recently about her editing *The Times* and said, "I'd rather shoot myself". She makes no secret of the fact that *The Sun* is the job in UK newspapers and nothing else appeals. Eventually, somewhere in Murdoch's American empire would seem a natural step.

It has been an exhausting but, on the whole, successful five years for "Rebekah of Wapping", and she will continue to bask in the extreme heat of Britain's bestselling daily newspaper for this reason alone: *The Sun* – she loves it.

Rob McGibbon is a freelance journalist and founder of the new aggregation website www.accessinterviews.com

'I remember Rebekah's first splash'

Patsy Chapman (right) *News of the World* editor, 1989-1994, recalls Rebekah Wade getting her first front page as a reporter on the *News of the World*.

"She was beaming and she was so enthusiastic that it was obvious she was going to climb the greasy pole. I was Kelvin's (MacKenzie) deputy on *The Sun* for three years and would have killed to have had the job Rebekah got – editor of *The Sun*.

"I think she has done brilliantly and has put the fun back in the paper. The paper bags the best exclusives and gets the best headlines.

"I say congratulations to her in succeeding in a very difficult, competitive world, where she has needed courage for snap-decisions, and where the whole world will see if you cock it up."

'She's done a superb job in a difficult time'

"Any editor that lasts five years on a red top is doing bloody well, especially these days," says former *Daily Mirror* editor David Banks. "She's actually done a superb job in a very difficult time.

"It's the same for all tabloid editors – you're in a falling market and you have to hang on to as big a percentage of your readers as you can. It's like presiding over a flimsy lifeboat that's plunging over Niagara Falls. She's hung in there, she's retained Rupert's favour – which is no mean task in itself.

"He's had great admiration for her, which persuades me she's a really good operator. He doesn't suffer fools at all gladly, so that's quite a recommendation in itself."

Banks says he thought Wade had brought the paper back to its roots after the Kelvin MacKenzie era in which "it became extremely adventurous and it did speak for Britain".

He says: "I think what Rebekah's done is not to tamper with that. She hasn't changed the paper in the way you might have expected: It hasn't become more female-friendly, it hasn't toughened up at all, it hasn't got more newsy.

James Ball



The Sun's haul of British Press Awards under Rebekah Wade

Reporters of the year: Oliver Harvey (2006), Trevor Kavanagh (2005)

Front pages of the year: Harry the Nazi (2006); Hutton Report Leaked (2005)

Financial journalist of the year: Ian King (2005)

Photographer of the year: Terry Richards (2004)

Sports reporter of the year: Neil Custis (2004)

Cartoonist of the year: Bill Caldwell (2005)

Showbusiness writer of the year: Victoria Newton (2006)

The deadline for entries to the 2008 British Press Awards is 23 January. For details go to www.pressgazette.co.uk