

Prints of protest

Why spend your own time and money on an FT spoof? And do you really need to print your own paper to get your point across?

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The first clue was the dateline - April 1 - but the 12-page pink paper that looked exactly like the Financial Times and which was handed out to more than 15,000 people at London railway and bus stations on Friday was not an April Fools' joke so much as a blistering attack on the UK media and PR industry in the run-up to this week's G20 summit.

From a front page lead story on how civilisation is "more or less" unlikely to collapse this century to a masthead on "the Age of Stupid - All the latest, very early", and complete with fake Foreign Office mandarin letters and advertisements for RBS, the publication was clearly professionally written, subbed and laid out, which is what you would expect from two professional journalists who asked to remain anonymous but who say they put thousands of pounds of their own money into the publication.

It took the pair "about a month" to write about 150,000 words at the same time as working full time and they say the publication, called Not The Financial Times, was partly designed to show other journalists that they seldom write objectively.

"We like to think that we are objective. But, in reality, what we write is framed by the opinions of powerful people," says the editor, who uses the name Raoul Djukanovic and claims to have worked for Reuters and the New York Times.

While most of the stories recalled Private Eye or Guardian-style April Fools' Day spoofs, several pieces expressed the deep dissatisfaction that many G20 and other protesters feel about the UK media and their role in propping up what they say is a disreputable political and financial system which prioritises growth and profit over ecology, rights and justice.

In the Corrections column, the spoof FT apologised to readers for neglecting to inform them of investors' hostility to action on climate change, the manipulation of climate talks and greenwash advertising. A lengthy analysis of how news is made ended in a blistering attack on the PR industry. A leader column railed against news that is "largely directed by the vested interests of political parties and capital ... commercial considerations influence too greatly how newspapers and other media gather, edit and represent news." It went on to accuse the press of ignoring political alternatives. "Swept along by prevailing currents, journalists tend to adopt official narratives even if they personally disagree," says

Djukanovic. "Modern pressures of work compound this. Much comes down to priorities." A story about kickback-fuelled arms sales could either be reported as Britain's aerospace industry receiving a boost, or as a dent to credibility on human rights. "Three guesses which angle won in newsrooms," says the FT2020 journalist. "You don't have to censor the news for effective PR. You just have to bury the truth."

There's nothing new about satirising newspapers, but protesters have only recently used them to make political points. The most famous spoof was probably the 20,000 print run of *Evading Standards*, a skit on London's *Evening Standard*, in 1997. The issue was seized by the police and three people were charged with incitement to affray.

According to the journalist Gibby Zobel, who covered the story: "The use of the masthead with the statue of Eros and a joke advert for the Metropolitan Police breached copyright. But the spoofers sued the Met for wrongful arrest and were awarded five-figure costs. The money funded the next edition, and *Evading Standards* made a return for the demonstration in the City of London with an appropriate thanks in the small print.

"In 1978 a New York Times spoof was produced by striking journalists, including Watergate's Carl Bernstein. Many other hacks in dispute have done the same, from London's *Time Out* to the *Morning Star*," says Gobel.

Relations between the media and protesters have often been stormy. In the last decade rightwing newspapers widely attacked anti-capitalist and environmental protesters. Police news teams have fed tips to newspapers about individual protesters. "You are part of the problem," has been a common refrain of protesters who have more or less excluded journalists from meetings and events.

But, in the last two years, environmental protesters have fought back at what they call "blatantly misleading" journalism, gaining corrections or apologies from the *Evening Standard*, the *Sunday Times*, the *Observer*, the *Sun* and the *Telegraph* and some backing from the PCC, the press regulator.

"There is now a better understanding of the roles of the press. We have learned not to trust certain people," says a spokesman for one protest group, who gave an assumed name.

In fact the authors of this week's FT spoof clearly have respect for the real newspaper. "Frankly the FT is more honest than most, both about its bias and the state of the world. We would all be better informed if we read news wires and the blizzards of factoids they aggregate. But who's got time for that?" asks Djukanovic.

A spokesman for the FT said: "We will continue to focus on reporting and analysing the G20 summit next week. It's not the FT, no comment."

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