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PRESS RELEASE

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Bleeding red-tops - Tabloid newspapers **The Economist**

Britain's working class is going online, and leaving its cherished tabloids behind

Britain's red-tops are steadily shrinking as the class that sustains them moves on

CLASS-CONSCIOUS Britons have an astonishing array of mechanisms to signal their social status and figure out, discreetly, that of their compatriots. These include the cars they drive, the words they use for meals and furniture, and—not least—the papers they read.

The person hiding behind a Financial Times on the tube is likely to be a man of the upper-middle or middle classes and under the age of 45, according to the National Readership Survey produced by pollsters at Ipsos MORI. Next to him the commuter perusing the bare breasts jutting from page three of the Sun is almost certainly working-class, ten years younger, and, as the circulation of Britain's "red-top" tabloids falls, an ever rarer find.

Sales of the Sun, Britain's most widely read newspaper, fell by 3% in the 12 months to January, according to ABC, which audits the circulation of newspapers and magazines. Copies sold by its smaller rival, the Mirror, declined by 6%.

At first glance these numbers seem old-hat, for newspaper sales have been falling for four decades. In part this reflects the increasing importance of television: seven out of ten British homes now get dozens of channels, usually by cable or satellite. Another reason is the internet: three-fifths of adults are now online regularly, compared with a third six years ago. Both make available at no extra charge much of the news and gossip that people used to pay for.

But red-tops, unlike most "quality" newspapers, are shedding readers at an accelerating pace. **Paul Zwillenberg**, of **OC&C Strategy Consultants**, which advises media firms, reckons that whereas daily red-top sales slipped an average of 2.1% a year between 1984 and 2000, the slide accelerated to 2.6% a year thereafter. The circulation of papers such as the Times and the Guardian, by contrast, has declined only slightly over the past six years; and the Independent and most weekly news magazines, including this one, are selling more copies than they were half a decade ago.

One reason why quality papers look healthier than the red-tops is that many middle-class folk warmed to the internet early, so their papers felt the pain years ago. In any case such readers are more likely than others to seek their news from many sources, both online and in print. And red-tops have been especially hard hit by the rise of free papers in city centres.

Henrik Ornebring, a fellow at the Reuters Institute at Oxford University, suggests another reason why downmarket tabloids are proving less resilient. Middle-class readers like their newspapers filled with analysis and opinion (especially if they agree with it), but the content that downmarket readers look for is much more fungible. Were one to switch the opinion pages of the Guardian, a left-of-centre paper, with those of the more conservative Telegraph there would be an uproar. But

exchanging two of this week's stories in the Sun and the Daily Star—both report that British breasts are Europe's biggest—would probably go unnoticed.

Those in search mainly of naked girls, football reports or celebrity scandal are also likely to want more of it faster than the red-tops provide. Such readers are decamping not only to the internet (and to mobile-phone messaging for sports scores) but also to a new breed of weekly magazines. Scantly clad women take up little more than 1% of the average red-top paper, but a quarter of weekly magazines such as Nuts and Zoo. Similarly, 43% of the content of magazines such as Heat that are aimed at young women consists of gossip. The “lad mags” are beginning to lose readers, but not back to the red-tops.

If Britain's downmarket tabloids want to hang on to their readers, their best bet is to stop patronising them. “They've been providing more and more sensational stories which readers lap up on the day but which turn them off papers in the longer term,” says Jim Chisholm, of iMedia, a consultancy. Instead of laying on still more breasts, they might concentrate on developing distinctive journalism on popular themes that readers cannot find elsewhere. Similar tactics have helped to stanch the flow of readers from quality papers. To argue that red-tops cannot do likewise demeans their readers.