

Too Clever by Half:
The Economist Is Bullying Americans into Intellectual Submission

by Robert Oliphant

Our American virus of declining newspaper circulation seems to be sparing *The Economist*, an international British weekly filled with heavy duty stats and big words, whose American circulation of over a million now snubs the shrinking 600,000 readers of the *Los Angeles Times*.

Its absence of bylines may please some jaded American readers, while others may be hooked by its coverage of foreign climes and exotica. What's most striking, though, is *The Economist's* blatant intellectual snobbery, especially its pervasive aping of the *London Times* Crossword, a traditional status symbol for "too clever by half" sophisticates like Detective Inspector Morse.

Apart from subtly permeating its sentences, this too-clever-by-half feature shows up most noticeably in *The Economist's* page by page headlines. Here are some from the opening section of a single (Nov. 14, 2009) issue, each followed by a speculative gloss (*The ECON* omits explanations).

- P. 18: "A City Named Sue"... The article discusses law suits; the punning headline alludes to a Johnny Cash song, "A Boy Named Sue."
- P. 25: "Heads in the Cloud"... A transparent Spoonerism of the familiar phrase, "head in the clouds."
- P. 40: "Come Home, Tom Joad"... The article discusses former residents returning to newly prosperous Oklahoma. The headline parodies the song title, "Come Home, Bill Bailey," substituting "Tom Joad" as a patronizing Oklahoma dust bowl link.
- P. 42: "Rolling Stuck"... The article discusses streetcars and their difficulties. The headline echoes "rolling stock," a familiar railroad phrase.

P. 46: “Her Master’s Voice” ... The article discusses the political future of Dilma Rousseff, chief of staff for Brazil’s president, Louis Ignacio Lula da Silva. The headline echoes “His Master’s Voice,” an antique pop cult painting of a bulldog gazing at 78 RPM record player.

P. 48: “Home Thoughts from Abroad” ... The article describes Canada’s prime minister’s knack for getting national-issue votes from foreign policy speeches. The headline repeats the title of a famous Robert Browning poem.

As indicated by the narrow range of page numbers, this is a small sample of the roguish crossword puzzles which *The Economist* via boldface shouts at its readers. But its difficulty level is representative, enough so to suggest that the goal of this feature is to please, not to frustrate.

One motivation may be a desire to flatter American readers by recognizing their popular culture, e.g., later headlines like “The War on Bambi” and “Secret Sauce” (alluding to Jack in the Box?).

This speculation is supported by the high percentage of soft pitches like “Survival of the Quickest,” “Birth Dearth,” “Stakes and Mistakes,” “Merger Interruptus,” “Land of the Setting Sun,” etc. — these balanced by occasional challenges like “the Coast of Utopia” (Shakespeare’s “seacoast of Bohemia”?) and “Crabbiness” is “All” (Shakespeare’s “Ripeness is all”?).

Certainly the Brits have always known that successful journalism requires lots of sucking up to one’s readers to balance occasional preaching of the gospel here and there. So perhaps America’s newspaper publishers should put the reading-pleasure principle to work more overtly, and productively.

By way of illustration: consider a recent *New York Times* crossword clue specifying “Flower’s bud” (5-letter word) with BAMBI as its answer. Lots of fun for some, perhaps, but surely a bit elitist for a national readership whose literacy scores are declining

As opposed to America’s sagging journalistic numbers, *The Economist’s* worldwide circulation has doubled since 1997. Granted that the substance has always been there, starting with Walter Bagehot, what seems like reader bullying at first glance may well be subliminally pleasing for most of its readers—profitably so.