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# British Newspapers 1860-1900

Ed King

British Library

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With the abolition of the duty on paper in 1861, the state-led constraints upon the production and sale of newspapers were finally lifted. Equally important was the relative restraint of the government, which did not seek to use the existing libel laws as an instrument of censorship. By the 1860s, British governments had come to realise that the daily and weekly press was no longer a threat to the social order. Newspapers had reached significant levels of sophistication: there were often four or eight pages per issue and very many were broadsheet in size which meant that six or seven columns of tightly packed text could be composed and printed. Whilst the majority of provincial newspapers were published weekly, London newspapers often appeared daily.

### London Newspapers

An early portent of the expansion of press circulation was created by the lowering in price of *The Daily Telegraph* in September 1855, from 2d to 1d. This resulted in an enormous increase in the circulation of the paper and by 1862 sales of *The Daily Telegraph* exceeded 140,000 copies per day. Edward Lawson (later Baron Burnham) edited the paper until 1885 when he became its owner. H.D. Traill was its chief political leader writer for fifteen years, 1882-1897. The paper was the organ of the middle classes; it captured a large portion of the reading public from *The Times* and paid to equip H.M. Stanley's second expedition to Africa in 1875-7. The success of *The Daily Telegraph* was matched by other newspapers. *The Standard* was taken over by James Johnston in 1857; his success at editing and managing the paper was such that by 1874 its circulation was 185,000 copies daily. Edward Lloyd launched his *Lloyd's Weekly News* in

1842; sales of nearly 900,000 were achieved in the 1880s, reaching nearly one million by the time Lloyd died in 1890. *Reynolds's Weekly Newspaper* was launched on 5 May 1850, and by the time George Reynolds died in 1879 circulation had reached 300,000 copies each week.

*The Times* continued to innovate throughout these decades. Stereotyping was introduced—multiple formes for printing from originals. Walther presses were introduced in 1869, with each press producing 12,000 sheets per hour. American Hoe feeder presses were introduced in 1888. Type composing machines were fully introduced by 1880, speeding up composition. By 1899, Wicks rotary type casting machines were in use which meant that new type could be made each day. Fast printing presses, stereotyping, machine composing—these developments were all led by *The Times* throughout the late 1800s.

Each issue of *The Times* was sold for 4d in 1855 and this was reduced to 3d from 1 October 1861. Between 1884 and 1902 more than eighty issues of *The Times* contained twenty-four pages per issue. 140,000 copies of the paper were printed to convey the news of the death of Queen Victoria in January 1901. The political stance of the paper was largely Liberal during the era of political reform but, after 1880, the newspaper became more Conservative, Unionist and Imperialist in outlook. It was against Irish Nationalism and remained strong in the depth of its foreign correspondence.

The *Daily News* was a leading organ of Liberal ideas from its beginnings in 1846. It championed the North in the American Civil War, the cause of Italian independence during 1859-60, and the emancipation of Bulgaria from Turkish rule from 1876-80. In 1868, the price of the *Daily News* was reduced on Monday 8 June 1868 to 1d from 3d. The paper was an exponent of Liberal imperialism during the administration of Lord Rosebury 1894-1895. In 1901 George Cadbury became proprietor and the orientation of the paper changed to a pro-Liberal stance.

During the 1860s and later, a number of features developed which began to influence the form and content of newspapers. There was the establishment of the Central Press in 1863; it was a pro-Liberal organisation, until purchased in 1870 by those who favoured the Tories. Partly as a response, the National Press Agency was established in 1873 with Liberal opinions. The Press Association was founded in 1868 as a non-partisan organisation; however, it served mainly Liberal papers. Julius Reuter founded his news agency in 1851; he made extensive use of telegraph lines to relay quickly foreign news and financial information. By 1860 most of the London dailies subscribed to the service that he provided. These press agencies greatly assisted the quality of information provided to newspapers, and proved to be especially valuable to provincial ones, as they could gather news summaries much faster than previously.

The role of press agencies was greatly enhanced by the worldwide development of undersea cables. The laying of the Atlantic Telegraph Cable in 1866 and 1867

using *The Great Eastern* steamship attracted great interest and very many contemporary newspaper articles and books were published about the cable-laying work and its success. Newspapers were the direct beneficiaries of the high speed telegraph communications on both sides of the Atlantic from this time onwards.

Gradually there was a rise in the status and economic position of journalists. More was expected of them, so their "professionalism" had to keep pace with expectations relating to the quality of their work. If patronage of the journalist had been a feature of the first half of the nineteenth century, then there was an increasing tendency, during the second half of the century, for journalists to come under the influence of owners who were far more commercially minded, and accordingly demanded that journalists provide writing which satisfied the demands of a business.

This was a period when politicians became far more aware of the power of the press, particularly after the passing of the second Reform Act of 1867, and the third Reform Act of 1884. As a consequence, politicians courted the owners of newspapers, their editors and journalists, in an attempt to ensure that newspapers would act as the outlet for their views. In return, owners, editors and journalists could advance themselves in their careers and (by the standards of the day) earn significant sums for their work. Journalists could impress their own views upon their friends and acquaintances. They saw themselves serving as intermediaries between the two major political parties (Liberal and Conservative), between the party members

and their leaders. Editors such as John Morley, W.T. Stead, T.P. O'Connor, J.A. Spender, C.P. Scott and J.L. Garvin all had this role. Political parties in power learned to attempt to control or influence newspaper proprietors and journalists by the use of the honours system—with knighthoods, baronetcies and peerages being used. For example, Alfred Harmsworth was made a baronet in 1903 and created Baron Northcliffe in 1905.

During these decades, perceptions of political support for newspapers sharpened. For the provincial press, Liberal opinion and tendencies overlaid the landowning and established Anglican Church interests of the earlier part of the century. However, from the 1880s, the Conservative Party realised that the press could exercise considerable influence over the electorate, and it sought to deny Liberal influence over the press in London and in the provinces. This process was assisted by division in the Liberal Party from the 1880s onwards over Irish Home Rule, imperial expansion, the second Boer War, and social and economic reform. These issues all divided and weakened the Liberal press. Consequently, there was a relative decline of the Liberal press after its "golden age" of the 1870s and 1880s. Papers known to be Liberal were: *Birmingham Daily Post*, *Daily Chronicle*, *Daily News*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Echo*, *Leeds Mercury*, *Manchester Evening News*, *Manchester Guardian*, *Morning Advertiser*, *Northern Daily Express*, *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, *Northampton Post*, *Northern Echo* and *Pall Mall Gazette*.

The Conservatives progressively sought to gain control of more newspapers. Those within the Conservative sphere were: *Globe*, *Morning Post*, *The Standard*, *The Times* and *Yorkshire Post*. Amongst these papers, Algernon Borthwick became editor of the *Morning Post* from 1852, and revived its fortunes. He became proprietor in 1877. The outlook of the paper was Conservative, Imperialist and Protectionist. The price of the paper reduced to 1d from 3d in 1881, with a consequent rise in circulation. For *The Standard*, William Mudford took charge from 1878. He had been editor of the paper since 1874. In the mid-1880s, *The Standard* was selling more than 250,000 copies daily. However, the paper did not adapt to the patterns of "new journalism" and circulation declined towards the end of the century.

### New Journalism

There were many features to the phenomenon of New Journalism. These were noticed by contemporaries as it developed. The editor W.T. Stead was one of its leading proponents. He employed women journalists, even paying them salaries equal to those of men. Near the end of the century in 1895, the Society of Women Journalists was established, to protect and champion the status of women within journalism. Stead contributed to the concept through what poet and writer Matthew Arnold described as 'Government by Journalism'. In Arnold's view, this amounted to the establishment of a process which would communicate the will of the people. Newspapers would create campaigns to agitate for change, to force the government to pay attention and to make legislation to do what the people wanted (or needed). Conspicuous examples of this were Samuel Plimsoll's work to save

the lives of British merchant sailors in the 1870s and 1880s, and William Gladstone's speeches against the Turkish atrocities in Bulgaria after 1876, which, together with his exertions in the Midlothian campaign of 1879-80, helped him win the general election of 1880. The role of the press as the "Guardian of the Guardians" was self-professed but flawed, as:

... this concept of the press serving Britain and its empire as the watchdog of government was chimerical, largely because (after the 1880s) the newspaper became ever more a commercial property, increasingly concerned with the quest for advertising and greater sales. To retain and increase their readership and their advertising clientele, the papers sought more to amuse and entertain than to educate and to inform. (Baylen)

The content of newspapers also reflected change; there were women's pages, gossip columns, sports coverage, parliamentary sketches, political commentary, extensive use of illustrations, sensational exposés and 'occasional notes' columns. Other innovations included: brief leaders, descriptive parliamentary sketches, the 'London Letter', the American-style interview and human-interest story, a stress on news rather than interpretative commentaries, more but concise foreign news reports and edited versions of political speeches (rather than verbatim reports). In the 1880s and 1890s, there was more emphasis on sport, a reflection of the increased leisure of all classes. Long passages of parliamentary debate gave way to more space devoted to sensational revelations. The success of serialised fiction in magazines (such as *The Strand Magazine*) drove the introduction of the serialised novel in newspapers and this increased the entertainment element.

Additionally, the layout of newspapers adapted to new circumstances—new kinds of stories and typographical innovation made newspapers more attractive to readers. There were cross-headings, brief paragraphs, informative headlines, vivid and profuse illustrations, attractive design, better format and newsprint, larger type and greater use of the front page for news. Newspapers such as *The Graphic* (1870); *The Illustrated Police News* (1864), *The Penny Illustrated Paper* (1861)—all displayed these features consistently. These developments all combined to make many newspapers a commercial success. However, time has shown that the cheap and tawdry content kept out of the market place the valuable, the authentic and the serious. The contention of New Journalism was that people are more swayed by interest and sympathy than by argument.

Out of these events, the rise of the businesses owned and led by Alfred Harmsworth drove further developments. He had published *Comic Cuts* (1890), *Illustrated Chips* (1890) and *Forget-me-Not* (1891), and their success enabled him to contemplate the creation of a daily newspaper. The mass circulation daily was created with the first issue of the *Daily Mail* on 4 May 1896. Sales of 397,215 copies were made on that day; sales rose to 400,000 by 1898; between 1899-1902 sales exceeded one million copies per day. Competitors emerged rapidly with the *Daily Express* launched by C. Arthur Pearson on 24 April 1900. The *Daily Mirror* was launched by Alfred Harmsworth on 2 November 1903 as a sister paper to the *Daily Mail*. The first editor was Mary Howarth, supported by a staff of experienced females, and the paper badged itself as the first daily paper for

gentlewomen. At the start of the twentieth century, the modern printed newspaper emerged from these new productions.

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