

Gale Primary Sources

Start at the source.

# Fact, Fiction and Fun

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Various source media, British Library Newspapers



Legislators, lovers and journalist, are the three divisions of men that most hate to be reminded of their promises. The perjures of the first are no subject for jesting; the second declare, that Heaven laughs at theirs; and as to the third, I am sure that both Heaven and earth, if the former has anything to do with the matter, must laugh at theirs.

As this extract from the first bound edition volume of *The Examiner* in 1808 suggests, in nineteenth-century journalism there was a fine line between fact and fiction. Although the ability to supply up-to-date and serious news was central to the role of the press, the amusement offered by wit, gossip, and articles on entertainment and lifestyle was also essential to their popular appeal and commercial success. Newspapers were thus closely linked to the home and family, to advertising and consumption, to sport and pastimes, and to humour and fantasy. How did the nineteenth-century press distinguish the "real" from the "imagined", and what role did newspapers play in the development of new cultures of consumption and leisure in nineteenth-century Britain?

### Fact and Fiction

In the first edition of the *Liverpool Mercury* on 5 July 1811, the editors declared that: 'Information, discussion, utility, and amusement are to be blended in a public journal; and yet so blended, as not to be confused.' Other early nineteenth-century newspapers similarly claimed to provide a compendium of diverse articles, emphasising their intellectual rigour, the reliability of their sources and their long-standing reputation for quality news. In order to further enhance this image of independence and accuracy, journalism was founded on anonymity. Articles on current political affairs did not acknowledge any named journalist, while

the few columnists who were acknowledged always used a pseudonym. For instance, Charles Dickens published his articles in *The Morning Chronicle* under the pseudonym 'Boz', William Makepeace Thackeray adopted more than twenty different known pseudonyms for his articles, and the real identities of many columnists remain unknown. In a further attempt to claim impartiality, the editor of *The Examiner*, Leigh Hunt, even declared stated in the first edition of his newspaper that he intended his intention not to publish any advertisements, promising 'they shall neither come staring in the first page at the breakfast table to deprive the reader of a whole page of entertainment, nor shall they win their silent way into the recesses of the paper under the mask of general Paragraph to filch even a few lines.' in his newspaper.

However, in spite of these claims, it is clear from the content of the newspapers that journalists in fact depended on their ability to mix fact and fantasy. While editors claimed that anonymity brought greater journalistic independence, it also increased writers' freedom to adopt a range of fantasy personae, to disguise their gender, fame or own opinions to create a ventriloquised and entertaining column. This playfulness was central to the newspaper genre.

The specialist newspaper, *The Illustrated Police News*, epitomised this ability to blend reality and fiction to create entertaining journalism. From its foundation in 1864, it offered melodramatic weekly stories of death and disaster, complemented by vivid illustrations of the scenes of crime. A selection of news headlines from a single paper (Saturday 12 January 1867) demonstrates

the entertainment such papers offered: 'Revolt at a French penitentiary - fourteen boys roasted alive'; 'Fatal explosion of a kitchen boiler at Hull'; 'Burglary prevented by a dog'. Although the newspaper repeatedly emphasised the reliability of the reporters' sources and the "true" nature of the events, the language used in the articles was designed to be light-hearted and sensational. Most of the illustrations were drawn purely from the artists' imaginations, and stories focused on the violent aspects of events, particularly if they had undertones of slap-stick comedy, gory misadventure or sexual brutality. *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* did not share *The Illustrated Police News*' specialist focus, but its circulation peaked at over one million copies per week in the 1890s, and the graphic reportage of violent and jingoistic imperial exploits was again central to its appeal. These newspapers were just two of many weekly publications that developed in the late nineteenth century to offer amusing and titillating news to fill the leisure time of a mass working-class readership.

### Humour and Satire

These "reality" news stories were presented as urgent and serious news reports, but other columns that claimed to be in pursuit of the truth drew explicitly on jokes, humorous anecdotes and biting political satire. Many of these prove hard to interpret for a modern audience, yet for contemporary readers the stereotypes and gossip attached to well-known political figures and parties would have been easily recognisable. Specialist satirical publications were masters of this genre, most notably *Punch*, the creator of the first comic cartoon illustration in 1843, whose jokes were re-published in many other daily and weekly newspapers. However,

provincial satirical publications also thrived from the 1860s, such as Birmingham's *The Town Crier, or Jacob's Belles Lettres*. This monthly Liberal publication was founded by writers for the *Birmingham Daily Post* who used the pun 'The Right of Translation and Contradiction will be enforced by Jacob's "staff"' to highlight their liberty to use their literary skills to mould a version of events that fitted their own political and personal persuasion. Such publications could therefore play a key role in shaping the reputations of figures in the public eye and, in particular, in influencing popular perceptions of political parties and campaigns (see Identities, Communities and Communication section on Political affiliations).

This humour was not reserved for the political world. Most newspapers included columns of miscellaneous and amusing news, under headings such as 'Sublime Conundrums' or 'Varieties'. These snippets of information and gossip were often copied from other newspapers or magazines and were sometimes used to fill spare column space in the newspaper. However, unlike the satire directed at specific figures in current political affairs, this humour focused above all on mocking the universal follies of everyday life. Relationships between husbands and wives were a particularly common topic, but interaction between employers and employees or parents and children were also favourite subjects. *The Manchester Weekly Times* (like many of the weekly papers) had a number of such columns, including 'Old Thoughts', which published the following comic dialogue under the title 'Saved money' in 1900:

Your wife's illness is very long and expensive, isn't it, Taddells? "Yes, it is expensive; but I believe that on the whole I save money by it." "How is that?" "She can't get out of the house at all during the shopping season."

This was factual and topical as it coincided with the New Year sales in Manchester, but also made use of the long-standing trope of gender stereotypes and marital conflict as a source of humour.

### The Family Newspaper

A new genre of publication which was central to these changes developed from the 1860s. Known as the 'family newspaper', these were published for a weekend, leisured and domestic readership, and included many columns on pastimes and popular entertainments, as well as "wholesome" jokes. For the first time these sections of the press were explicitly aimed at a gender- and age- specific audience, rather than implicitly addressing only the concerns of an adult male reader.

Although some newspapers had published monthly articles on ladies fashions earlier in the century, these were copied directly from specialist magazines, such as the leading illustrated French fashion magazine, *Le Follet*. However, an important feature in the late nineteenth-century family newspapers was the specially-commissioned 'Ladies column' or 'Hints for housewives'. These were usually written by female journalists, who offered tips not just on fashion, but on a wide range of female concerns. Many focused on women's work in the home, including tips on cleaning, domestic economy, health, child-rearing and cooking,

as well as the latest fashions in clothing, beauty routines, home decoration and entertainment. Some were structured like the modern "problem page", providing solutions to specific concerns and offering a new form of interaction between female journalists and readers. These columns were largely written by women who could afford a leisured, middle-class lifestyle, but many of these weekly newspapers—such as *The Preston Guardian* or *Hull Packet*—would have been read principally by women from working-class backgrounds. Despite the fact that much of the advice set out in these columns was practically unattainable, they remained highly popular and increasingly prominent in these newspapers.

Children's columns were also added to some newspapers and became a regular feature in northern provincial newspapers from as early as the 1880s. For instance, *The Preston Guardian* published a weekly 'Children's Corner' edited by 'Uncle William'. This included competitions, word puzzles and letters written by children, but was also associated with the Animals' Friendly Society. By 1900 almost 16,000 children had written to the newspaper to join the Society by pledging to protect animals.

### Leisure, Sport and Pastimes

Cultures of leisure underwent fundamental changes in nineteenth-century Britain, particularly in the period 1860-1900. These developments were directly linked to wider transformations in people's everyday lives: weekly working hours were reduced in many industries, relative incomes increased, transport and communications improved, and standards of living

rose. Not only was the activity of reading a newspaper an increasingly popular way to fill this new free time, but newspapers also chronicled and nurtured the development of a wide range of other leisure activities, most notably sport and popular fiction.

A small amount of sporting news had been included in most papers throughout the century, but until the 1860s reports focused almost exclusively on the rural and gentry sports of hunting, racing and coursing. However, from the 1870s there was a flood of specialist sporting newspapers aimed at a working-class audience, including titles such as *The Sportsman* and *The Sporting Life*. The mainstream daily and weekly papers also devoted more columns to listings, results and reports from these events. *The Era* was a pioneer of sporting news and in its inaugural edition of 30 September 1838, the editor described how it would meet the demands of 'the tens of thousands throughout the country, who look upon sporting intelligence as the most valuable feature of a newspaper.' The range of sports covered also diversified, so that by the late nineteenth-century whole pages were devoted to football matches played as part of the newly-created FA Cup, rugby and cricket, in addition to the long-standing interest in horseracing. Newspapers also used the increased popularity of sport and gambling to create their own readers' puzzles and competitions.

The expansion of Saturday newspapers and the foundation of specialist periodicals also created a new form of writing: the serialised novel and short story. Poems had always been published in newspapers, but serialised fiction rapidly became one of the most

popular parts of the press. On 5 January 1900 the *Manchester Weekly Times* advertised itself by stating: 'All who enjoy breezy, healthy fiction should make a point of reading these deeply-interesting and up-to-date serials.' Other lifestyle columns offered advice on a wide range of leisure activities, including theatre and concert reviews, gardening, chess, cycling and mathematical puzzles. Nevertheless, it was the attraction of pure fiction rather than just information on hobbies that expanded particularly in the final decades of the century.

### Consumption and Advertising

Commerce was central to the success of the press. Throughout the century, most newspaper titles devoted as much as 50 per cent of their page-space to commercial notices. This was cynically remarked upon in *The Manchester Times* of 24 October 1828:

England is an advertising nation. We advertise for matrimonial connection; for seats in parliament; for serious young men who fear the Lord and can drive a plough. We advertise, with a cynical disregard for decency, our wants and our weaknesses, our dinners and our love-intrigues; but from advertisement to quackery is but a step. When all the world are thus pressing forward, and canvassing the public by all sorts of indirect means, merit must e'en go and do likewise, or retire into utter obscurity, and yield its station to Macassar oil and patent blacking.

Four types of advertisements filled the newspapers: public information notices by governments or organisations; advertisements for goods or shops; promotional adverts for events and entertainments; and small personal notices placed by individuals in the

'wanted' columns. All of these categories of adverts existed throughout the century, but with the invention of new and cheaper printing techniques, advertisements grew markedly larger, more illustrated and more complicated in their promotional techniques. New nationally-distributed branded household, food and health products aimed at female consumers were also increasingly prominent, such as Colman's mustard, Cadbury's cocoa or Pear's soap.

## Conclusion

Laughter, satire and entertainment were central to the popularity of newspapers and the proliferation of titles between 1800 and 1900. The publishing market was highly aggressive and financially insecure throughout the century. This made it essential for newspapers to appear "modern", exciting and entertaining so as to attract the readers and advertisers upon whom their fortunes depended. Late nineteenth-century editors were very skilled at mixing fact with fantasy in order to encourage diverse groups of ordinary readers to spend some of their increasing disposable income and leisure time in reading their publications. Newspapers could thus simultaneously promote, sell, and become entertainment.

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