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# Identities, Communities and Communication

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Various source media, British Library Newspapers



It is taken for granted in twenty-first-century Britain that the media can significantly influence the ways in which we think about ourselves and the world around us. But how would readers of nineteenth-century newspapers have described themselves? A wide range of newspapers were available, but to what extent did this variety reflect—or even help to create—diverse cultures and communities within the United Kingdom? Here we will focus on four collective identities: national cultures; geographical communities; political allegiances; and class identities.

### National Identity

In Benedict Anderson's influential text of 1983 (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*), he defined a nation as 'an imagined political community...It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (p. 2) He argued that the development of a printing industry, which published texts in a vernacular language and which could influence a wide community of readers, was crucial to the construction of a nation as a sovereign and limited community that people believed made them part of a single culture.

The Act of Union created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland in 1801 by uniting the Kingdom of Ireland (consisting of modern-day Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland) with Great Britain. England and Wales had officially formed a single nation from the mid sixteenth-century, while the Scottish and English dynasties were united in 1707. All four territories were

now governed directly from a single Parliament at Westminster in London, and were also part of the wider multi-racial British empire (see essay on British Empire) ruled by a single monarch. However, the differences within the United Kingdom were striking. This complex relationship between recent unity and long-standing separation, and even enmity, meant that there were two types of nationalist movement in the United Kingdom that were pulling in opposite directions. The first called for greater unity to form the Kingdom into a stronger and more internationally powerful imperial nation-state. It was assumed that all four nations were to be increasingly fused through a single parliament, laws, system of justice and culture. Ideas of Englishness and Britishness were frequently conflated; it was taken for granted that England was the superior part of the Union and that London was the unchallenged centre.

The opposing form of nationalism argued for greater cultural and political autonomy for specific ethnic groups within the over-arching rule of the British monarch. These nationalist movements in Wales, Scotland and Ireland fluctuated in popularity, but newspapers played a crucial role in creating a sense of shared identity, particularly with the proliferation of popular regional newspapers after 1850. This identity was not just cultural and linguistic, but also strongly political, particularly in Ireland. Movements for Irish Home Rule received crucial support from Liberal newspapers such as *The Freeman's Journal*, which by 1900 used the slogan 'Ireland a Nation'. The significance of nationalist politics was not confined to a single nation, but shaped political affiliations throughout the United Kingdom.

The growth of the Welsh press can be used to exemplify the role of popular newspapers in shaping national identities. *Baner ac Amserau Cymru* (*The Banner and Times of Wales*) was the first weekly newspaper to report to a mass readership through the Welsh language and to centre its news on Welsh affairs. It campaigned vigorously against land evictions and the oppression of Nonconformity, and highlighted the need for reform of Welsh ecclesiastical and temperance laws. This resulted in the Welsh Sunday Closing Act of 1881 to close pubs on the Sabbath, making it the first Act passed by Parliament since the sixteenth century to recognise Wales as an independent nation. *Baner* also promoted a Welsh cultural identity that celebrated the contribution of those who had battled against the English, Anglican and aristocratic establishments. For instance, in the 1860s the paper ran a campaign to commemorate Welsh heroes by erecting publicly-funded monuments. The culture of Welsh music and literature centred on Eisteddfod was also extensively reported in all Welsh newspapers by the late nineteenth century, presenting an image of a united Wales.

### Local and Regional Communities

Many British newspapers grew out of a sense of identity centred upon the smaller geographical unit of a town or region. Each provincial newspaper provided detailed factual coverage of events and news from their own district. They also often expressed pride in their own district, and some provincial newspapers increasingly promoted a regional identity. Yorkshire and Lancashire newspapers were particularly notable at the end of the century for their inclusion of articles on local topography, history and literature. For instance, *The Preston Guardian* of 1900 included a column entitled

'Lyrics of Lancashire' to publish dialect poems, as well as a large, weekly illustrated article, 'Northwards Gleanings', which described the district's landscape and culture. By way of contrast, newspapers published from London included coverage of criminal court cases and local government in the capital, but they made no attempt to construct a shared sense of geographical community amongst their readers.

Provincial newspapers could also be increasingly practically independent from the national press and from London priorities. From the 1850s British newspapers began to be supplied with news from outside their local area by electric telegraph. Not only did this allow the rapid relay of news from overseas (for instance, the first trans-Atlantic telegraph cable was used from 1866), but it was also used to transmit news between regions within the United Kingdom. Previously the provincial press had relied on printing reports that had been published in the London papers earlier in the week and which had been dispatched by coach, steam packet boat, or from the late 1830s by rail to the provinces. This meant that *The Belfast News-letter*, for instance, printed news items verbatim that had been published in London three or four days earlier. The significance of innovations in telegraph technology was highlighted by the *Manchester Daily Times* of 1 January 1855:

The quality of Telegraphic Communication, which places all parts of the kingdom very much on a footing of equality, will enable the conductors of the *Manchester Daily Times* to bring the latest news before their readers at least five hours earlier than the London morning papers.

This equal and speedy access to news, usually via Reuter's News Agency, also allowed provincial newspapers greater freedom to select and report news relevant to the industries and interests of their local area. They therefore increasingly emphasised their status as unchallenged disseminators of news from the "capital" of a local district to a large number of readers in the surrounding counties, sometimes producing specific editions aimed at the "country" or other towns. Therefore, while no district had aspirations for political autonomy, local cultural identities and regional differences were increasingly "invented" and celebrated in the press.

### Political Affiliations

Although twenty-first-century political parties retain elements of their late nineteenth-century names and ideologies, nineteenth-century party politics can appear bewildering to a modern audience. British politics also changed fundamentally during the nineteenth century: personal political allegiances gradually developed into a formal party system; the roles of Members of Parliament, the Cabinet and the Prime Minister were restructured; and new political tactics and ideologies were introduced. Most importantly, political participation gradually became open to a much larger proportion of the male population (see Rights, Responsibilities and Emancipation).

Politics and the press were intimately linked, and newspapers were seen as an important means of educating the expanding electorate about their responsibilities as voters. Although independence was central to the ideals of the press, most also expressed a clear political affiliation and some even received

subsidies from parties to sustain their partisan depiction of public affairs. On a local level newspapers provided extensive coverage of candidates' speeches, meetings and campaign notices. The spectrum of political views expressed by newspapers can be classified into three general categories: Conservative, Liberal and Radical. Although this simplifies the complexity and fluidity of political views, the main characteristics of each of these political affiliations can be briefly outlined.

Conservative newspapers generally represented the traditional English establishment, which expressed strong loyalty to the Crown, the Church of England and landed interests. In the first half of the century fear of the disorder and popular radicalism unleashed by the French Revolution was used to justify opposition to social reform and political change. Later in the century, the Conservatives under Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli increasingly sought to attract working-class voters, and advocated a paternalistic vision of society. Tory newspapers tended to be strongest in the more rural counties of England, and increasingly weak in Scotland, Wales and Ireland.

Liberalism emerged from the views of early nineteenth-century Whig politicians, and merged with the Peelite Conservatives to form the Liberal Party in 1859. These newspapers expressed strongly individualistic principles, defending parliamentary power, local civic independence, social reform, free trade and personal rights. Liberal supporters were concentrated in northern and midlands industrial towns, where many were middle-class businessmen or manufacturers who belonged to the Nonconformist

Church. Freedom of expression and an independent press were central to Liberalism, and consequently most of the pioneering nineteenth-century newspapers expressed Liberal opinions.

Radical political views were represented most famously by the Chartist movement and the many newspapers that it spawned, such as *The Charter* or *The Northern Liberator* (see essay on Chartism). However, demands for workers' rights, a democratic constitution and social welfare were made by many other associations set up by skilled working-class men throughout the century, many of which were linked to the trade union movement. The Social Democratic Federation was founded in 1881 and the Independent Labour Party in 1893, but socialist and democratic parties remained weak in national politics. However, individuals expressing Radical views exerted a significant influence on municipal politics in cities such as London and Glasgow and on specific campaigns for social and electoral reform.

While newspapers expressed clear opinions on political issues, it is impossible to know how far readers shared these views. Letters pages suggest that not all readers considered themselves to be part of a single political community, which the newspaper promoted. One correspondent wrote to the Radical-Liberal *Manchester Times* in 1828 declaring himself to be 'a Churchman, and some little of a Tory', but stated that he intended to continue to read the newspaper expressing opposing political views.

## Class

Class identities were simultaneously universal and invisible in the nineteenth-century press. While newspapers seldom explicitly addressed a single class of readers, the style and subjects upon which they reported, their price and the advertisers who used them suggest that many were associated with particular classes of readers. Three examples of this subtle interaction between the press and class identities illustrate this.

An early nineteenth-century newspaper, such as *The Examiner*, addressed itself exclusively to "literary readers" and its circulation figures of only a few hundred in its first decade suggest that it was indeed read by an intellectual, wealthy and largely male upper-class elite. While participation in this exclusive "Republic of Letters" could be central to individuals' identity, these communities were not only sustained by the shared experience of reading *The Examiner*, but also by a wide range of other publications as well as by regular personal interaction in London and the country. By way of contrast, it can be argued that the press played a key role in creating—as well as sustaining—middle-class and working-class "imagined communities" later in the century. Drohr Wahrman has argued in his book *Inventing the Middle Class* that for the first time in the 1830s the newly-enfranchised middle-classes began to be called "the public", and were seen to be the most important section of society. Appeals to "public opinion" were almost universal in mid-century newspapers and the attitudes of this imagined "public" were used to justify many campaigns for reform. Similarly, from the 1880s provincial newspapers in industrial districts began to publish weekly columns with titles such as 'The Labour World' or 'Work and

Wages'. These columns reported on workers' strikes, trade union demonstrations and renegotiated wage deals from around the country. This allowed recently-literate and newly-enfranchised working-class readers to imagine themselves part of a wider community of "the people", whose shared hardships and struggles bound together workers from diverse industries into a single community. In this way, newspapers did not just describe and reflect experiences of class-based inequalities, but also encouraged readers to think about themselves and their experiences in new ways. Nevertheless, the large daily provincial newspapers that thrived from the 1860s onwards tended to attract an eclectic and cross-class readership. Most were sold at the affordable price of 1d, yet they were also the best source of daily news on local government, business and social affairs. As the contents of these newspapers diversified into many short articles on a wide range of topics, editorial force and strong political views were increasingly disguised or rejected. This made them an acceptable source of basic news for readers who identified themselves with very different social, political and class communities.

## Conclusion

The interaction between readers' everyday experiences and newspapers' representations of the world in which they lived was complex. The press offered an increasingly rapid and influential means for experiences to be communicated and shared amongst a large group of people. Exclusive political, class, local and national identities could all be fostered in this way, and these communities could also be used to exclude and disadvantage people who did not belong to these "imagined communities". Other identities could also be important, particularly ethnicity, religion, gender and

occupation, but these communities were less explicitly addressed in the mainstream press. Above all, newspapers could play a crucial role in encouraging individuals to think about their relationships to people who they would never meet, and their personal responsibilities to the wider world, in new ways.

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