

# The Original Press Baron: The Role and Legacy of Lord Northcliffe

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Alfred Harmsworth, better known under his later title Lord Northcliffe, launched the *Daily Mail* on 4 May 1896 and laid down a model of popular journalism that still shapes our newspapers today. To his admirers, he was the 'greatest figure who ever strode down Fleet Street';<sup>1</sup> to his detractors, he was the man 'whose interference with reading habits alone ... effectively put literature out of the reach of the average man'.<sup>2</sup> Whatever one's views, his cultural impact on early twentieth-century Britain was hard to ignore. Northcliffe's influence can be seen in three main areas. First, he applied the populist techniques previously found in the Sunday press, weekly magazines and American journalism to transform the British national morning newspaper, in the process opening up a lucrative mass market. Second, he changed the economic basis of the press, placing much greater emphasis on the competition for circulation, on securing branded advertising, and on using the latest technology to print and distribute his papers. Third, he sought to create news as well as reporting it by launching campaigns on a wide range of issues, generating controversy and publicising his papers at the same time. Northcliffe became an inescapable figure in public life and laid down the template for the modern 'press baron'.

Northcliffe was born in Dublin in 1865, the first son of an English barrister, Alfred Harmsworth, and his Irish wife, Mary. The Harmsworths moved to London two years later, and from the age of 13, Alfred junior was educated at Henley House School in Hampstead. He started the first school magazine and was soon writing occasional journalism for other periodicals; after he left school he became editor of *Bicycling News* at the

tender age of 20. His eye for business was evident when, in June 1888, he launched *Answers to Correspondents*, which built on the success of George Newnes's best-selling general interest magazine *Tit-Bits*. '*Answers*' supplied intriguing and unusual nuggets of information in response to readers' questions, and was soon a firm success: within five years it was selling more than a million copies a week. The magazine's profitability enabled Northcliffe to set up a company, Amalgamated Press, to launch other titles, including the pictorial magazine *Comic Cuts*, and the women's weekly, *Home Chat*. His ambitions continued to grow, and in 1894 he entered the prestigious world of newspapers by buying the loss-making *Evening News*. Having turned the '*News*' around by giving it a more modern, accessible style, and increasing the number of features and illustrations, he took his boldest step yet: launching his own national daily paper.

### Populist Techniques

Northcliffe used all his experience in popular commercial publishing to develop something different from the heavy and serious fare provided by Victorian morning newspapers. His magazine background taught him the importance of features and competitions. He also drew heavily on his knowledge of American journalism: he was particularly influenced by papers such as James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald* and Charles Dana's *New York Sun* which had successfully developed a new concise style with snappy headlines and a more attractive layout. He borrowed and adapted ideas from many sources and refashioned them to produce something distinctive and new. Hamilton Fyfe, a trusted contributor, recalled that 'the Chief' wanted the *Daily Mail* to 'touch life at every point ... He saw that

very few people wanted politics, while a very large number wanted to be entertained, diverted, relieved a little while from the pressure or tedium of their everyday affairs.<sup>3</sup> Selling at a halfpenny, half the price of its rivals, the *Mail* sought to reach the growing lower middle-class market — typified by the suburban clerk — as yet untapped by the daily press.

Northcliffe demoted the public sphere from its position of overwhelming dominance in the news pages. ‘Four leading articles, a page of Parliament and columns of speeches will NOT be found in the *Daily Mail* on 4 May’, promised advertising posters before the first issue, and the pledge was kept.<sup>4</sup> Now political events would be reported not for the educated elites, but for the average reader. Northcliffe’s right-hand man, Kennedy Jones, told reporters to ‘Make the news clear. Avoid technical terms or explain them. State who the persons are whose names are mentioned ... Don’t forget that you are writing for the meanest intelligence.’<sup>5</sup> In much of the paper, however, the complexities of politics or diplomacy were passed over in favour of intriguing material from everyday life. Northcliffe repeatedly told his staff that ‘people are so much more interesting than things’ and called for stories that would feed the curiosity of readers about their fellow citizens.<sup>6</sup> He insisted that his papers provide ‘Interviews, Descriptions of People and articles of the personal type’, and he urged journalists to focus on topics of perennial interest, such sex, health and money.<sup>7</sup> Crime and court reporting were also given considerable prominence: the *Mail*’s ‘On the Seamy Side’ column provided ‘the sort of dramatic news that the public always affect to criticize but is always in the greatest hurry to read’.<sup>8</sup> The *Mail* provided a greater range of

stories than its competitors, and established an extensive news gathering operation that often scooped the rest of Fleet Street. Much of the *Mail*’s success stemmed from Northcliffe’s restless desire to reach out to all sections of the mass market. The *Mail* was a designed as a miscellany providing something for everyone. Northcliffe recognized, for example, that most newspapers paid little attention to female readers, and he placed considerable emphasis on tapping this neglected market with feature material on fashion and domestic life (see ‘The *Daily Mail* and Female Readers’). Northcliffe was similarly committed to the various features ‘designed to familiarize children with the paper from infancy upwards’: he was intensely irritated when it was suggested to him that the Mirror’s ‘Pip, Squeak and Wilfred’ cartoon was more interesting than the *Mail*’s own ‘Teddy Tail’.<sup>9</sup>

He was also determined that the paper did not rest on its laurels and kept up-to-date with modern interests, such as motoring, cinema, and sport. Northcliffe repeatedly warned his staff against slipping into a ‘middle-aged somnolence’, and his news editor, Tom Clarke, recalled how young journalists became ‘the Chief’s obsession’.<sup>10</sup> Keeping up-to-date included taking advantage of the latest developments in publishing. Northcliffe told his staff in June 1920 that he was ‘more and more coming to the conclusion that the public judge the paper by the pictures, and the best paper can be marred by bad pictures’: he continually prompted the *Mail*’s picture editors to take more care in choosing the photographs.<sup>11</sup>

## Economic Transformations

'The dynamic personality of Northcliffe,' observed an influential report in 1938, 'lifted the Press on to the plane of big business.'<sup>12</sup> Newspapers always meant more to him than simply maximizing profit, but Northcliffe was certainly determined to bring modern business techniques to all aspects of the *Mail* operation — printing, distribution, retailing, advertising content — and in the process he transformed the nature of Fleet Street. He was the first person to offer shares in a newspaper company, and this provided the capital to invest in staff, facilities and the latest equipment. The resources required to run a newspaper on this scale increased significantly. The cost of launching the *Daily Mail* was estimated at £500,000, five times as much as setting up a London daily 25 years earlier.<sup>13</sup> With this level of investment, the market inevitably became much more competitive and cut-throat.

Reaching a mass market required printing thousands of newspapers as quickly and efficiently as possible. Accordingly Northcliffe invested in the latest machines that could cut, fold and count newspapers as well as print them. Northcliffe was keenly aware of the need to have his papers available for customers early in the morning, so he extended the use of trains to distribute them, and in 1902 he opened a printing plant in Manchester to produce an edition for northern England and Scotland. At the other end of the chain, Northcliffe pressed his agents to ensure that sufficient copies were reaching newsagents and being displayed prominently. More broadly, the *Mail* sought to bring a new rigour and transparency to the process of selling newspapers by using accountants to certify the paper's circulation every month. At a time when newspapers sales figures

were often shrouded in mystery — the Audit Bureau of Circulations would not be established until 1931 — this move both demonstrated the unprecedented reach of the *Mail* and put pressure on other papers to follow suit.

Audited circulation figures were of greatest interest to advertisers, and allowed the *Mail* to generate more revenue by using a scale of charges based on the numbers of readers rather than on space in the newspaper. With retailing and consumer industries developing rapidly in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and branding increasingly significant, advertising space was becoming ever more valuable, especially where large audiences could be delivered. Guided by the entrepreneurial instincts of Wareham Smith, the *Mail*'s advertising department began to expand the space allocated to display advertising, especially for the products of major drapers and department stores. In 1896, the *Mail* became the first paper to run full-page advertisements, and these soon started appearing on the front page. The front page was the most lucrative space of all, and was reserved for advertising until the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. The reliance on revenue from branded advertising provided a powerful extra incentive to chase the mass circulation: extra readers made each inch of space more expensive.

## Generating Controversy

Northcliffe had a flair for publicity. For him, the role of the popular newspaper was not just to inform and entertain readers — it was to get them talking. Newspapers should generate controversy, either by

printing provocative opinions or by crusading for change. In that way, they would engage readers and get noticed in the public realm.

Northcliffe had strong opinions about politics and international affairs, and he led numerous crusades for or against particular policies or public figures (see 'The *Daily Mail* and Public Life' and 'Northcliffe and the First World War'). But he knew that it was just as important for the paper to create talking points about other aspects of life. One of the *Mail*'s most prominent early campaigns was launched in 1911 with the aim of increasing the consumption of wholemeal bread (known at the time as 'standard bread'). The paper printed over 200 articles extolling the nutritional benefits of wholemeal loaves, and prizes were offered for the best schoolchild's essay on brown bread. Whether the *Mail* changed consumption habits is doubtful, but the newspaper attracted considerable publicity.<sup>14</sup>

A more light-hearted campaign was launched when Donald Clark, a councillor from Tonbridge, Kent, declared in 1920 that mixed bathing on beaches was 'the worst public scandal of our so-called civilization', and that 'much of the unrest in the country is due to the barbarous licence in women's dress'.<sup>15</sup> Tom Clarke, the *Mail*'s news editor, recalled suggesting 'half-jestingly' to Northcliffe that the paper

ought to commission the councillor to go round the seaside resorts and write his views of what the bathing costumes were and what he thought they should be. 'Capital', cried the Chief. 'Arrange it at once. Plan a tour and pay all his expenses. Send a first-class reporter with

him to help him ... Send a photographer too ... It will be one of the best holiday-season features we have had for years'.<sup>16</sup>

For Northcliffe, this was, as Tom Clarke recognized, a 'deliberate move in his campaign for brightness in the paper'. But the controversy that was initiated was not only long-lasting — reports on this issue were still being filed at the end of the decade — it was also significant in focusing attention on shifting notions of morality. By presenting Councillor Clark as a representative of Victorian propriety and then turning him into little more than a figure of ridicule, the *Mail* was helping both to undermine 'traditional' standards and to clarify definitions of 'modern behaviour'. When some 'older school' *Mail* journalists complained that the feature was 'not only frivolous, but also getting near the pornographic', Northcliffe was unrepentant: 'Everybody is reading these articles ... We must not become too respectable.'<sup>17</sup>

By the time of the 'mixed bathing' campaign, though, Northcliffe was in decline. His political standing had been damaged by Lloyd George's excoriating attack in the House of Commons on 16 April 1919, in which the Prime Minister accused the press baron of exhibiting a 'diseased vanity' by constantly seeking to meddle in the post-war peace-making.<sup>18</sup> Rumours of megalomania and madness abounded. The reality was that Northcliffe's health was faltering. A round-the-world tour in 1921 allowed him some respite from the pressures of work, but it failed to revitalize him, and on his return his behaviour was alarmingly unpredictable. He died at his home in London on 14 August 1922 after complications from a blood infection. He was 57. His status was recognized by burial in Westminster Abbey,

and thousands of well-wishers lined the route as his funeral cortege wound its way there.

With his unerringly accurate instincts for what would interest the public, his eye for business, and his ability to generate controversy, Northcliffe did more than any other individual to shape popular journalism in modern Britain. Subsequent generations of editors would develop his ideas in new directions, encouraging greater sensationalism and intrusiveness than he would have sanctioned; few would deviate markedly from the model he created.

## ENDNOTES

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- 4 S. J. Taylor, *The Great Outsiders: Northcliffe, Rothermere and the Daily Mail* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1996), p. 32.
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- 10 *Northcliffe Bulletins*, 22 Sept. 1919; Clarke, Diary, p. 120.
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- 14 Taylor, *Great Outsiders*, pp. 136–8.
- 15 His articles in the *Mail* repeated these charges, e.g. *Daily Mail*, 14 Aug. 1920, p. 3.
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- 18 J. Lee Thompson, *Northcliffe, Press Baron in Politics 1865–1922* (London: John Murray, 2000), p. 325–6.

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