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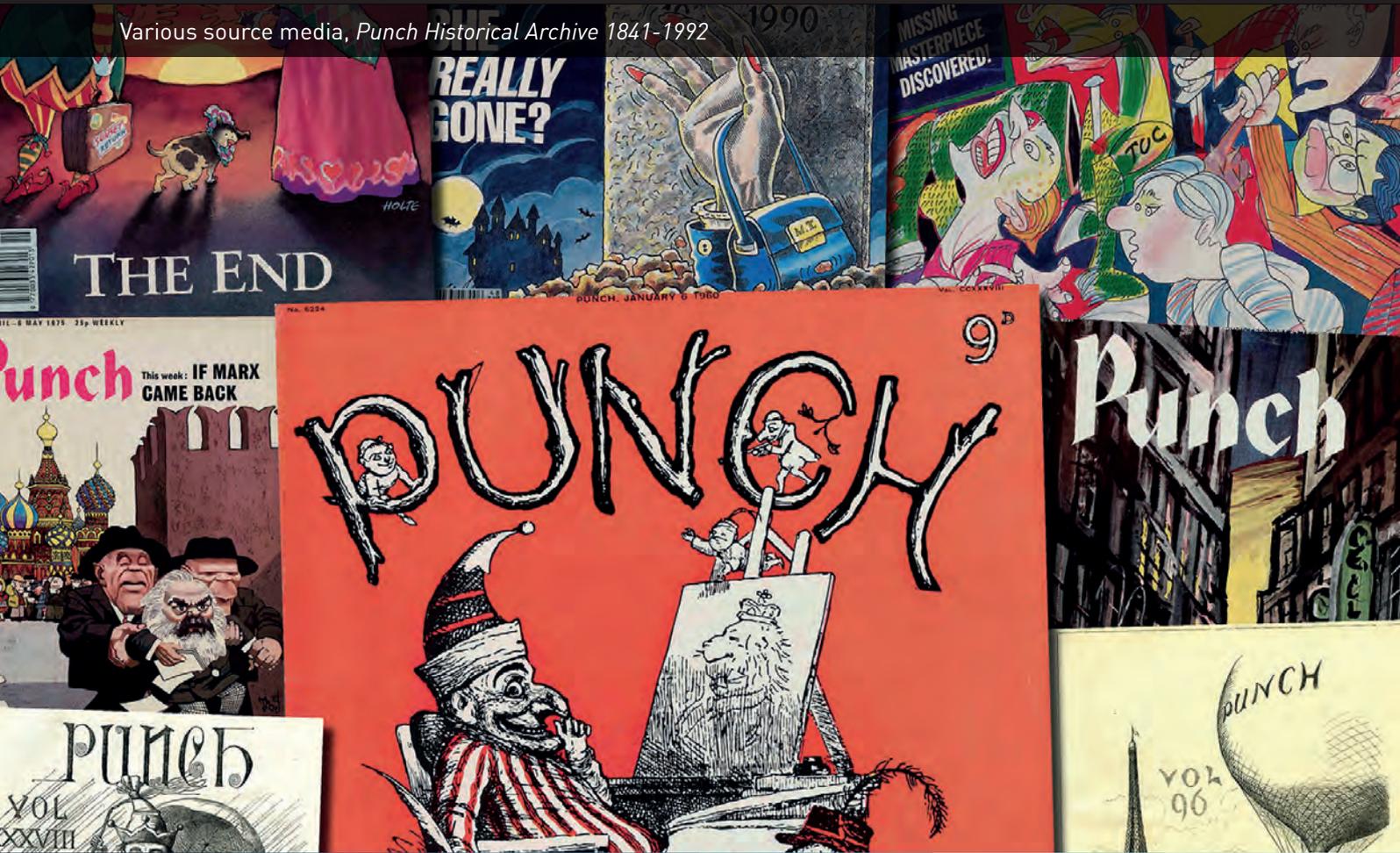
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Two Distinct yet Equally Great Nations: *Punch's* Relationship with *The Times*

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Various source media, *Punch* Historical Archive 1841-1992



Introduction

The Times, the most influential newspaper of nineteenth century Britain, and *Punch*, the comic periodical which became a cultural institution, were in many ways polar opposites. *The Times* was serious and stately, a standard of sobriety and decorum, written for and read by the upper middle class, and recognised as the national newspaper of record. *Punch* was humorous and tongue-in-cheek, dominated by outrageous graphics and extravagant texts, conceived as a defender of the poor and oppressed, and perceived as a humour sheet eager to poke fun at anyone or anything. Yet these apparently disparate periodicals symbiotically came to present a unified composite worldview of the state of Britain.

The Times' Attitude toward Punch

The Times consistently and warmly espoused *Punch*. As early as December, 1842, *The Times* opined that "the career of this little publication [*Punch*], from its outset till now, has been one of unflinching success; week after week it has sustained itself with astonishing constancy, and shown that its authors are inexhaustible in their resources; Ministers of Momus, they reign over the kingdom of satire and burlesque with unlimited sway." Over the years *The Times* regularly utilised squibs from *Punch* as column-fillers, thereby both validating and indirectly promoting the humour periodical. And in July 1891, *The Times* celebrated the fifty-year jubilee of *Punch* with a series of accolades: "he who would know the Victorian age must not neglect our contemporary's pages," "it has been a faithful mirror of English life," "he [*Punch*] has generally spoken what honest Englishmen felt." Presumably *The Times'* admiration was sincere, although it may, at least in

part, have been taking its cue from the favourable views of the general public. But an additional rationale for *The Times'* support may be found in a further assertion in its *Punch* jubilee article: "he [*Punch*] has generally in regard to public affairs taken his cue from the columns of *The Times*." Indeed, the sustained similarity of viewpoints between the two periodicals is evident if one compares commentaries in *The Times* on many social or political issues with analogous satiric presentations in *Punch*.

Punch follows The Times

Punch, for its part, did not acknowledge taking guidance from *The Times*, yet it frequently referenced *The Times* as its information source regarding public events. Moreover, although *Punch* often mocked newspapers such as *The Morning Post*, *The Standard*, or *The Morning Herald*, its references to *The Times* were generally respectful. Often articles from *The Times* were used as take-off points for *Punch's* humorous excursions, and the caption "from *The Times*" lent the shine and authority of the nation's leading newspaper to *Punch*.

In addition, *Punch* often conflated or equated its own image with that of *The Times*, thereby suggesting a commonality of value and perspective between the two publications. Several examples illustrate this positioning: On March 7, 1846, *Punch* ran a graphic displaying an equivalency between the serious newspaper and the comic periodical: the figure displayed one man standing, reading *Punch*, while another, seated, was hidden behind *The Times*. In 1848, in a representative short article "A Cruel Attack Upon

Attornies [sic]," *Punch*, while actually making clear that it was in full agreement with *The Times*, nominally attacked the more serious newspaper for printing a letter on attorney abuses. In the August 1854 article "Punch before Parliament" the text of a facetious parliamentary inquiry of *Punch* is coupled with a graphic of "the Editor of 'The Times' getting at the Ministerial secrets." In the facetious article "Anti-Punch League," published on 17 October 1863 (17 October 1863: 155), it is assumed that "distinguished literary men" who abuse *Punch* (primarily because their would-be contributions have been rejected) similarly abuse *The Times*. One would be hard pressed to find a volume of *Punch* without several associations of this type.

Indeed, even internal *Punch* squabbles were sometimes framed with references to *The Times*. For instance, during the so-called "Papal Aggression" of 1850, the noted *Punch* Irish-Catholic graphic artist, Richard Doyle, threatened to resign (and eventually did resign) to protest *Punch*'s anti-Catholic representations. His colleagues sought to dissuade him, noting that *The Times* staffers were not resigning in protest of the anti-Catholic tone adopted by that newspaper. Doyle's response, that *The Times* was a monarchy while *Punch* was a republic, connotes two distinct yet equally great nations worthy of comparison.

Arguably, *Punch*'s informal connection with *The Times* provided authority and respectability by association-and respectability was particularly important, as other comedic periodicals had fallen victim to perceived crudeness or scurrility. Perhaps more importantly, the

influential upper middle class read, and presumably took its sense of issues and personalities, from the pages of *The Times*. If *Punch* wished to capture and retain those readers, it had little choice but to adopt a similar worldview. In its first decade *Punch* sometimes advocated more radical values than those of the centrist-conservative *The Times*, but, even then, *Punch* generally followed *The Times* in identifying the issues, men, manners and behaviours worthy of satire. Indeed, a comic periodical which depends on humorously drawn analogies and representations, exaggerated extensions of topical news, or the presumed proclivities of public figures, has little choice but to follow the terms and topics of discourse already adopted by its desired reader base.

Influences are seldom unidirectional, and it is clear that as *The Times* influenced *Punch*, and *Punch*, by embodying the national mood, also influenced *The Times*. For example, Thomas Hood's inflammatory poem "The Song of the Shirt" was first published in *Punch*; when *The Times* reprinted the poem a week later, it effectively assumed the mantle of *Punch*'s more emotional and empathetic posture on the evils of poverty and abuses of the marketplace.

Punch's Distinct Role

With due regard for its editorial positions, *The Times* was, of course, primarily a presenter, definer and shaper of the news. *The Times* established which events were brought to the public consciousness, and (albeit subjectively) elucidated the facts of public affairs. In comparison, *Punch* did not present the news per se, but rather gave voice to the public reaction to the news.

Employing the tools of humour and satire, *Punch* established, embellished, or shaped the public reaction to events. Presumably few read *Punch* to find out what the news was, but after laughing or raging over *Punch's* treatment of topical events, many readers probably came to view these events somewhat differently or more emotionally.

For example, *The Times*, through the words of its war correspondent, William Howard Russell, reported the many disasters of the Crimean War. But arguably *Punch*, through its continual visual attacks displaying an oblivious and incapable Prime Minister, as exemplified by *Punch's* 1854 cartoon "You are requested not to speak to the man at the wheel" (displaying a sleeping Lord Aberdeen at the tiller of a sinking ship) played its own important role in galvanising public opinion.

Or consider *Punch's* "Irish Devil-Fish" cartoon of 1881, which displayed Prime Minister Gladstone valiantly striking an octopus-like monster dubbed the land league. This metaphoric visualisation of Gladstone's Land Act (which reformed landlord-tenant practices in Ireland) is far more visceral, far more gripping, than the many *Times* articles published in 1881 which discuss this legislation.

Advice for Readers of the *Punch* Archive

Punch typically embellished or parodied then well-known events or personalities. Contemporary readers of *Punch* understood relevant contexts, but current

readers of the *Punch* archive may sometimes lack the background to fully appreciate these articles.

For example, during the 1840s *Punch* often satirised the protectionist politician, Lord George Bentinck. In early 1847 *Punch* ran, without explanatory comment, a full page graphic entitled "Lord George Bentinck, Prince of Rails, Trying on King Hudson's Crown." Knowledgeable readers of today might get part of the joke - which draws upon the scene in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* in which Prince Hal tries on the crown - but they would likely be bewildered by the references to "Prince of Rails" and "King Hudson." *The Times* archive for February 1847, however, contains several articles discussing the bill Bentinck had introduced into parliament to subsidise the development of an Irish railroad for the "railway king," George Hudson. In this case, as in others, the mystery of politically-oriented *Punch* graphics can be resolved and the significance of political satire more fully appreciated by bringing *The Times* and *Punch* into juxtaposition.

Perhaps the most difficult *Punch* articles to fully decipher or appreciate are the partial-page squibs satirising minor topical events. (By analogy, consider that future historians may regard the monologues of today's late-night television comedians as cultural gold mines - yet it will not always be easy to retrieve the riches and nuances of the jokes.) *Punch* offers similar challenges for modern readers. For example, a short January 1844 article by William Thackeray, "Important Promotions! Merit Rewarded," acclaims Jenkins (a standard *Punch* personification of *The Morning Post*) upon the reception of a peerage from the King of

France. One wonders: what could this possibly be referring to? The answer can be found in *The Times*, which earlier had reprinted an obsequious Morning Post article on the pretender to the French crown. The fawning nature of The Morning Post toward supposed royalty, as revealed through a perusal of this article, is the true subject of the *Punch* satire. To contextualise the various squibs and articles in *Punch*, readers may wish to consult *the Times* Digital Archive.

Conclusion

The idea that *The Times* and *Punch* in their differing ways each documented nineteenth-century life was well understood during the Victorian era. The July 17, 1875 issue of *The Athenaeum* stated it most effectively:

The future historian of the nineteenth century will, we imagine, reckon the volumes of *Punch* as not the least useful among the materials of his work, not as much as a record of events . . . but rather as testifying to the temper in which they were at any time viewed by the English middle class. *Punch*, in short, does for the moderately-cultivated Philistine when he is inclined to laugh which *The Times* reader does when he is, or thinks himself, in earnest and reflective. It puts his idea into a comic or epigrammatic form, and makes the other side look ridiculous, and he feels almost as pleased as if he had himself overwhelmed his foe with sarcasm.

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