

Eighth Edition
Power

Without

Responsibility

Press, Broadcasting and the Internet in Britain



James Curran and Jean Seaton

ROUTLEDGE

Power Without Responsibility

This book attacks the conventional history of the press as a story of progress; offers a critical defence and history of public service broadcasting; provides a myth-busting account of the internet; a subtle account of the impact of social media and explores key debates about the role and politics of the media.

It has become a standard book on media and other courses: but it has also gone beyond an academic audience to reach a wider public. Hailed as ‘a classic of media history and analysis’ by the *Irish Times* and a book that has ‘cracked the canon’ by the *Times Higher*, it has been translated into five languages.

This edition contains six new chapters. These include the press and the remaking of Britain, the rise of the neo-liberal Establishment, the moral decline of journalism, the impact of social media and a history of attempts to reform the press. It contains new research on the relationship between programmes, institutions and society. It places key UK institutions in the wider context of international affairs and their impact. The book has been updated to take account of new developments like Brexit and the rise of Jeremy Corbyn and the shift in authority and legitimacy prompted by social media. It does this with a clear explanation of how policy can shape media outcomes.

James Curran is Professor of Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Jean Seaton is Professor of Media History at the University of Westminster, and Director of the Orwell Foundation.

Praise for this book

‘This is the book that changed everything in media studies.’

Sally Young, *University of Melbourne*

‘This is a brilliant seminal history of broadcasting, press and the new media, vividly and insightfully told, with sharp vignettes of political interference and policy challenges. It is a powerful reminder of why public service broadcasting and truthful communication is vital to our democracy.’

Baroness Helena Kennedy,
President of Mansfield College, Oxford

‘This skillfully revised and updated edition of Curran and Seaton’s magnificent history is just as fresh and relevant now as it has been over the decades.’

David Hesmondhalgh, *Leeds University*

‘The pleasure of a classic that just keeps redelivering. *Power Without Responsibility* proves itself yet again as the go-to source for analysis of the British media at their best and worst.’

Barbie Zelizer, *Annenberg School of Communication,
University of Pennsylvania*

‘If I was able to suggest one book about the history of journalism – whether to a student, a journalist or someone who simply wanted to know more about the role of the news media in our democracy – it would be *Power Without Responsibility*. Much of our understanding of the past is altered by the present, so we are all indebted to James Curran and Jean Seaton for this excellent new edition. There has been no shortage of controversies and debates about the news media in recent years: this book guides us through them with a sharp eye, a clear head, and the wisdom that comes from a formidable sense of history. Packed with eloquently delivered information, it is analytical but jargon-free, critical without ever being doctrinaire.’

Justin Lewis, *Cardiff University*

Power Without Responsibility

Press, Broadcasting and the
Internet in Britain

Eighth edition

James Curran and Jean Seaton

Eighth edition published 2018
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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First edition published by Fontana 1981
Second edition published by Methuen 1985
Third edition published by Routledge 1988
Seventh edition published by Routledge 2010

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Curran, James, author. | Seaton, Jean, author.
Title: Power without responsibility: press, broadcasting and the internet in Britain / James Curran and Jean Seaton.
Description: Eighth edition. | London; New York, NY: Routledge, 2018.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018001982 | ISBN 9780415706421 (hbk) | ISBN 9780415710428 (pbk) | ISBN 9781351212298 (ebk)
Subjects: LCSH: Press—Great Britain. | Broadcasting—Great Britain. | Digital media—Great Britain.
Classification: LCC PN5114.C84 2010 | DDC 072—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018001982>

ISBN: 978-0-415-70642-1 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-415-71042-8 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-351-21229-8 (ebk)

Typeset in Garamond
by Sunrise Setting Ltd, Brixham, UK

To our children and their partners: Kitty, Tristan, Cassie,
Daniel, Margherita, Nathaniel, Seth and Pearl



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<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

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Jean Seaton is Professor of Media History at the University of Westminster and Director of the Orwell Foundation, which uses the work of George Orwell to help shape media and public understanding by celebrating honest writing and reporting and confronting uncomfortable truths. She is author, editor or joint editor of *Carnage and the Media: the Making and Breaking of News about Violence*; *The Media in British Politics*; *The Media of Conflict*; *The Prerogative of the Harlot: Politics and the Media*; *What is to be done? Making the Media and Politics Better* and her volume of the official history of the BBC *Pinkoes and Traitors: the BBC and the Nation 1974–87*, was published in 2015 and a much extended and amended paperback version in 2016. She was a founding member of the Board of Full Fact, and the Reuters Institute, and on the board of *The Political Quarterly*. She writes on a range of issues academically but also for the Guardian and other media and broadcasts regularly on contemporary history and current affairs.

Preface to the eighth edition

Since its first publication in 1981, this book has been cited in over 1600 academic publications, sold more than 90,000 copies and been translated into five languages. However, it has only flourished because the text has been periodically updated and revised. The book is often critical of the media: but in the hope of improving how we deal with them. It also shows how important reporting and the media are to our collective lives. As the photographer in Tom Stoppard's play *Night and Day* observes "People do terrible things to each other, but it's worse in the places where everybody is kept in the dark."

In this edition, a chapter covering the last seventy-odd years of press history has been retired and replaced with four new chapters. These focus on the role of the press in the making and remaking of Britain since 1945, concluding with a chapter on the moral decline of the press.

In addition, the public controversy generated by phone hacking and the Leveson Inquiry has prompted the writing of another new chapter in place of one that was showing its age. This new chapter examines different attempts to reform the press, and the reasons why these mostly failed. The rise of social media has also led to the introduction of a further new chapter which examines its impact.

The broadcasting history has been re-focused and enriched. Original archival material not previously available on pre-war reporting, Churchill's war time broadcasts, Poland, Suez and Hungary, the Coronation, the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Falklands War and security issues as well as more on the working of impartiality. There is a wider discussion based on original research of programmes such as *Civilisation*, the role of David Attenborough's work, arts programming and BBC Monitoring.

The book has also been updated and revised more generally. In response to peer reviews, a start has been made in providing full footnotes. This book took originally about four years to research and write, and we wanted then to present it in full academic dress. Detailed footnotes are a form of scholarly accountability. However, this book was originally aimed at a general public, and the publisher had other ideas. We compromised by having a general bibliography at the end, and a quota of ten footnotes per chapter. Reversing this decision made almost forty years ago is an arduous process: it has been confined to some parts of the book.

Over the years, family, friends and colleagues have helped in numerous ways (all acknowledged in previous editions). James Curran and Jean Seaton share a lifetime's passionate commitment to making discussion and policy about the media better but they do not always agree about how that is best done. In this edition, James Curran is grateful for the help of Eleftheria Lekakis who looked at newspaper responses to public enquiries on the press, a key input into chapter 25.

However, there is one debt we have shamefully never acknowledged. Two Welshmen were in different ways sponsors of this book. The eminent journalist, Hugh Cudlipp, arranged for the Mirror group (IPC) to make a donation to the Open University for a temporary fellowship to support press historical research. It enabled James Curran to extend his press history from 25 to 175 years, providing the foundation for Part I of this book. The other patron was Raymond Williams. He persuaded Fontana to commission this as the first book for a series he was editing. Without his championship, this book would probably have never seen the light of day.

Part I

Press history



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Press history as political mythology

Pioneering Victorian studies portrayed the history of the British press as a story of progress in which newspapers became free from government and served the people.¹ This became an orthodoxy that lasted a hundred years.

According to this Whig account, the press became independent partly as a consequence of a heroic struggle against state censorship, inspired principally by a love of liberty. Key developments in this struggle are said to be the abolition of the Court of Star Chamber (1641), the end of newspaper licensing (1694), Fox's Libel Act (1792), and the repeal of newspaper taxes in the period 1853–61.²

The winning of freedom is also attributed, in this traditionalist view, to the capitalist development of the press. Indeed some Whig historians place greater emphasis on market liberation than on political struggle as the main driver of press freedom, especially in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. 'The true censorship', John Roach writes of the press in the Hanoverian era, 'lay in the fact that the newspaper had not yet reached financial independence, and consequently depended on the administration or the parties'.³ It was allegedly only when the press was established on an independent commercial footing that newspapers became 'the great organs of the public mind' free from both government and party tutelage.⁴

Advertisers are said to have played an especially important role in this process of liberation. As Ivon Asquith argues in relation to the press in the period 1780–1820:

Since sales were inadequate to cover the costs of producing a paper, it was the growing income from advertising which provided the material base for the change of attitude from subservience to independence. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that the growth of advertising revenue was the single most important factor in enabling the press to emerge as the Fourth Estate of the realm.⁵

The press, in this traditionalist account, became a representative institution by the mid-nineteenth century. Market competition, we are told, 'forced papers to echo the political views of their readers in order to thrive'.⁶ As a

consequence, the press became a great democratizing agency which 'helped to articulate, focus and formulate the growing force of public opinion'.⁷ The press also contributed allegedly to the maturing of Britain's democracy in later Victorian Britain by reporting the news in a more responsible manner. This interpretation was once so hegemonic that even a Marxist like Raymond Williams wrote approvingly that 'most newspapers were able to drop their frantic pamphleteering' in the period after 1855.⁸ Similarly, the progressive historian Alan Lee portrayed the later Victorian period as a near-golden age of journalism.⁹

Of course, Whig press history was never monolithic even during the period of its ascendancy. While most press historians in this tradition viewed the 1850s as the time when the British press became truly free, some revisionists argued that this happened later.¹⁰ Foremost among these was Stephen Koss who argued, in a celebrated two-volume history, that the full emancipation of the press from authority did not take place until the later 1940s.¹¹ But while the date of the press's liberation was disputed, the storyline remained the same. The press progressed from being an instrument of government and party to becoming the voice of the people.

This book attacks this Whig narrative on three main counts. The period around the middle of the nineteenth century inaugurated, it is argued, not a new era of press freedom but a system of censorship more effective than anything that had gone before. Market forces succeeded where legal repression had failed in conscripting the press to the social order in mid-Victorian Britain. While market censorship softened in the subsequent period, it still rendered the press unrepresentative. Far from becoming the Fourth Estate of Whig legend, much of the press degenerated into 'rotten boroughs' dominated by oligarchs.

Secondly, the struggle against press censorship was not inspired solely by a love of liberty. This is to project contemporary sensibilities on to people with different mind-sets from our own. In fact, many leading parliamentary campaigners against press taxes in the nineteenth century were more preoccupied with indoctrinating the masses than with planting the tree of freedom. How they are remembered, in the Whig account, is different from how they were.

Above all, the Whig projection of press history as an unfolding story of popular empowerment is too simplistic. Of course, the dismantling of repressive state censorship was an historic advance; and up to the 1850s the theme of progress in the development of the press has some substance. But the press subsequently became ever more entangled in the coils of power: not just the influence of political parties that so concerned Whig revisionists but the bind-weeds of power in all its manifestations – economic, cultural, social and political. Much of the press chose to side with privilege, and in some cases to actively bully the vulnerable.

This counter-thesis was first published in 1981.¹² It contributed to a sea-change in the academic history of the press, reflected in recent overviews of the field.¹³ Some thirty-five years and seven editions later, it is clear that

Whig press history is in retreat, with few adherents left.¹⁴ No historian now narrates the development of the press 'up to the present day' as an unfolding story of progress in the way that Whig historians like Stephen Koss and their Victorian antecedents once did.

Afterlife

Yet if Whig press history has lost favour in universities, it lives on in the pages of the press. Hallowed Whig themes are reverently presented as established truths. 'It was advertising', proclaims the former *Guardian* editor, Alan Rusbridger, 'that set the British press free'.¹⁵ 'Remember, advertisers guarantee press freedom', echoes John Bird, founder of the *Big Issue*.¹⁶

Another consecrated theme, the struggle against state censorship, gets a regular airing in a distorted form. Numerous newspaper articles and editorials in 2013 claimed that 'three hundred years of press freedom' would come to an end if Leveson-inspired reform was implemented.¹⁷ This implied that the press was already free in 1750 when publication of fundamental criticism of the social order was a criminal offence, and when even the reporting of parliamentary debates was prohibited, and that this long entrenched freedom would be terminated if the press's self-regulatory system was audited by an independent panel established (like the BBC) by Royal Charter. This is not serious history but crude propaganda based on a total disregard of the evidence, in which the past is being misreported to influence the present.¹⁸

The empowerment theme of Whig press history is also often presented in the press in a simplistic way, stripped of any nuance. Thus, Trevor Kavanagh boasts in *The Sun* that 'a traditionally robust newspaper industry . . . for 300 years . . . has been the defender of the ordinary citizen against the rich and powerful'.¹⁹ This is a view of press history in which imperialism, anti-semitism, hostility towards migrants, the persecution of gays and lesbians, the bullying of those on benefits, the adulation of 'wealth-creators' and cheerleading for right-wing governments has been conveniently airbrushed from the record.

These are all examples of the way in which Whig press history – now long repudiated by historians – lives on in the press. What follows is an alternative, evidence-based account informed by recent scholarship. For the sake of brevity, we will begin our account in the early nineteenth century when newspapers were displaying increasing signs of independence from government.

Notes

- 1 F. K. Hunt, *The Fourth Estate*, 2 vols. (London, David Bogue, 1850); A. Andrews, *The History of British Journalism*, 2 vols. (London, Richard Bentley, 1859); J. Grant, *The Newspaper Press*, 3 vols. (London, Tinsley, 1871); H. R. Fox Bourne, *English Newspapers*, 2 vols. (London, Chatto & Windus, 1887).

- 2 F. Siebert, *Freedom of the Press in England, 1476–1776* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1956); H. Herd, *The March of Journalism* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1952).
- 3 J. Roach, 'Education and public opinion' in C. W. Crawley (ed.) *War and Peace in an Age of Upheaval (1793–1830)* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 181.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- 5 I. Asquith, 'Advertising and the press in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: James Perry and the *Morning Chronicle* 1790–1821', *Historical Journal*, xviii (4), 1975, p. 721. This is an especially scholarly presentation of a once standard view, typified by R. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1957), and C. W. Crawley (ed.) *War and Peace in an Age of Upheaval (1793–1830)* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 322.
- 6 H. Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 1695–1855* (Harlow, Longman, 2000), p. 4.
- 7 Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society*, p. 225.
- 8 R. Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1965), p. 218. He later modified his view in R. Williams, 'The press and popular culture: an historical perspective' in G. Boyce, J. Curran and P. Wingate (eds.) *Newspaper History* (London, Constable, 1978).
- 9 A. J. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press, 1855–1914* (London, Croom Helm, 1976).
- 10 For example G. Boyce, 'The fourth estate: the reappraisal of a concept' in Boyce et al. (eds.) *Newspaper History* (1978), documented the continuing influence of political parties on the press, extending into the twentieth century. Some historians in this tradition, such as F. Williams, *Dangerous Estate* (London, Arrow Books, 1959), were also concerned about the rise of press barons.
- 11 S. Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain*, 2 vols. (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1981 and 1984).
- 12 This book was preceded by two essays: J. Curran, 'Capitalism and control of the press, 1800–1975' in J. Curran, M. Gurevitch and J. Woollacott (eds.) *Mass Communication and Society* (London, Arnold, 1977); and J. Curran, 'The press as an agency of social control: an historical perspective' in Boyd et al. (eds.) *Newspaper History* (London, Constable, 1978).
- 13 K. Williams, *Read All About it: A History of the British Newspaper* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2009); K. Williams, *Get Me a Murder a Day!: A History of Media and Communication in Britain*, 2nd edition (London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2009); M. Conboy, *Journalism in Britain: A Historical Introduction* (London, Sage, 2011); M. Conboy, *Journalism: A Critical History* (London, Sage, 2004); M. Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850–1950* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2004); J. Petley, 'What fourth estate?' in M. Bailey (ed.) *Narrating Media History* (Routledge, Abingdon, 2009), among others.
- 14 The most notable exceptions are Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society* and H. Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth Century England* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998); and K. Schweizer, 'Newspapers, politics and public opinion in the later Hanoverian era' in K. Schweizer (ed.) *Parliament and the Press, 1689–c.1939* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2006). Had these historians researched the later period, it is likely that the Whig trajectory of their accounts views would have been modified. To this group should be added

- M. Hewitt, *The Dawn of the Cheap Press in Victorian Britain* (London, Bloomsbury, 2014), an important new study which is addressed in Chapter 3.
- 15 'Q&A with Alan Rusbridger: The future of open journalism', *Guardian Online*, Comment is Free, 25 March 2012. Available at: www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/mar/25/alan-rusbridger-open-journalism (last accessed 24 April 2013).
 - 16 J. Bird, 'Remember, advertisers guarantee press freedom', *Big Issue*, 10–16 August 2009.
 - 17 'Don't sacrifice our hard-won freedoms', *Daily Mail*, 18 March 2013; 'Press freedom: No longer made in Britain', *Sunday Times*, 24 March 2013; 'Free speech and revenge', *Sun*, 19 March 2013.
 - 18 This is explored further in Chapter 26.
 - 19 T. Kavanagh, 'If MPs seize the presses it is YOU who will lose out', *Sun*, 15 March 2013.

The struggle for a free press

Like all persuasive mythologies, the Whig interpretation of press history contains a particle of truth. A section of the commercial press did become more independent of government in the period between 1760 and 1860, partly as a consequence of the growth of advertising. This additional revenue reduced dependence, in some cases, on party subsidy; encouraged papers to reject covert secret service grants (the last English newspaper to receive one was the *Observer* in 1840); improved the wages and security of employment of some journalists so that they became less biddable; and financed greater expenditure on news gathering, enabling newspapers to become less reliant on official sources and more reluctant to trade their independence in return for prior government briefing.¹ This last shift was symbolized by *The Times*'s magisterial declaration in 1834 that it would no longer accept early information from government offices since this was inconsistent with 'the pride and independence of our journal', and anyway its 'own information was earlier and surer'.²

However, this beguiling account has three limitations. Firstly, the independence of the commercial press was not sustained because numerous commercial newspapers became intertwined with political parties in the second half of the nineteenth century. Instead of functioning as a so-called Fourth Estate (an autonomous institution representing the public), much of the press became an extension of the party system during this period.³

Secondly, its portrayal of advertisers as the midwives of press independence is directly contradicted by the rise of the radical press. Early radical papers did not receive significant support from advertisers. Yet, they were totally independent of government and of the Westminster system.

More generally, this Whig account focuses attention on leading London commercial papers like *The Times* while downplaying the development of the radical press. If this selective perspective is shifted, a different understanding of the development of journalism emerges.

Rise of radical journalism

Governments in the eighteenth century sought to prevent the emergence of radical journalism through seditious libel and blasphemy law. This was

framed in a catch-all way to make uncompromising criticism of the social order a criminal offence. However, the law became increasingly difficult to enforce once juries were empowered by Fox's Libel Act (1792) to determine guilt or innocence. This was brought home to the authorities by the sensational acquittals, in seditious libel trials, of Eaton, Hardy and Tooke in the 1790s, Wooler and Hone in 1817, and Cobbett in 1831. The sharp edge of the law was further blunted in 1843 when Lord Campbell's Libel Act made the statement of truth in the public interest a legitimate defence.

Yet even before the 1843 Act was passed, the authorities had come round reluctantly to the view that seditious libel prosecutions were often counter-productive. When the editor of *The Republican* was prosecuted in 1819, the paper's circulation soared.⁴ Similarly disillusioning experiences prompted the Attorney General to conclude in 1832 that 'a libeller thirsted for nothing more than the valuable advertisement of a public trial in a Court of Justice'.⁵ This disenchantment was reflected in a shift of government policy: there were only sixteen prosecutions for seditious and blasphemous libel in the period 1825–34, compared with 167 prosecutions during the preceding eight years.⁶

Instead, the authorities came to rely increasingly on the newspaper stamp duty and taxes on paper and advertisements as a way of muzzling critical journalism. The intention of these press taxes was twofold: to restrict the readership of newspapers to the well-to-do by raising cover prices; and to limit the ownership of newspapers to the propertied class by increasing publishing costs.

Successive governments increased the burden and scope of press taxation in order to make it a more effective safeguard against subversion. The newspaper stamp duty was doubled between 1712 and 1789, and doubled again between 1789 and 1815, while the advertisement duty more than trebled between 1712 and 1815.⁷ Publications subject to the stamp duty were redefined in 1819 to include political periodicals. In the same year, a security system was introduced which, among other things, required publishers of weeklies to register their titles, and place financial bonds of between £200 and £300 with the authorities. Although the ostensible purpose of this requirement was to guarantee payment of libel fines, its real objective was to force up the cost of publishing and ensure, as Lord Castlereagh explained to the Commons, that 'persons exercising the power of the press should be men of some respectability and property'.⁸ It is perhaps worth noting – in view of the subsequent soaring of publishing costs – that the government was persuaded that its initial proposed security of £500 was an undue limitation on the freedom of the press since it would have made the freedom to publish too costly.⁹

The government's reliance on press taxes seemingly worked for a time. The rise of radical journalism that had begun in the 1790s, and gathered momentum in 1816–17, subsided by the 1820s. However, the revival of radical agitation in the 1830s gave rise to a new phenomenon: an underground press which avoided the stamp duty, developed a well organised distribution system,

and administered a hardship fund for the families of newspaper sellers who were imprisoned.

The authorities responded to this challenge by attempting to enforce the law more effectively. Unstamped newspapers were intercepted, and those involved in their production and distribution were jailed in increasing number. At least 1130 cases of selling unstamped newspapers were prosecuted in London alone during the period 1830–36.¹⁰ Yet, despite these measures, the radical press continued to flourish. ‘Prosecutions, fines and imprisonments were alike failures’, the Minister in charge of the fight against the unstamped press later recalled.¹¹ In June 1836 the government was forced to concede defeat. The Commons was informed that the authorities ‘had resorted to all means afforded by the existing law’ but that it ‘was altogether ineffectual to the purpose of putting an end to the unstamped papers’.¹²

By 1836 the unstamped press published in London had an aggregate readership of at least two million.¹³ This probably exceeded that of its respectable, stamped counterpart. The fiscal system of press control seemed on the point of collapse, since leading publishers of stamped papers publicly warned that they would also evade the stamp duty unless more effective steps were taken to enforce it.

The Whig government responded to this crisis with a well-planned counter-offensive. New measures were passed which strengthened the government’s search and confiscation powers. Penalties were also increased for being found in possession of an unstamped newspaper, and the stamp duty was reduced by 75 per cent in order to make ‘smuggling’ less attractive.¹⁴ What has been viewed as a landmark in the advance of press freedom was in fact repressive. As Thomas Spring Rice, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, explained to the Commons, a strategic concession, combined with increased coercive powers, was necessary in order to enforce a system that had broken down. The intention, he stated candidly, was to ‘put down the unstamped papers’.¹⁵

The government’s new strategy succeeded in its immediate objective. ‘No unstamped papers can be attempted with success’, sardonically commented Henry Hetherington, a leading radical publisher, shortly after being released from prison, unless ‘some means can be devised either to print the newspaper without types and presses, or render the premises . . . inaccessible to armed force’.¹⁶ By 1837 the unstamped press had disappeared.

Compliance with the law forced radical newspapers to raise their prices, even though the stamp duty was much reduced. Whereas most had sold at 1d in the early 1830s, their successors in the 1840s charged 4d or 5d – a sum that was well beyond the means of the average worker. However, the government’s attempt to destroy the radical press was thwarted through collective action. Informal groups of working people pooled their resources each week to purchase newspapers; union branches, clubs and political associations increasingly stocked radical titles; and publicans in radical neighbourhoods were encouraged to follow suit. Partly as a consequence of this concerted resistance,

new radical papers emerged which gained even larger circulations than those of their predecessors.

Indeed, radical publications were the circulation pace setters throughout much of the period 1815–55, exceeding that of the respectable press. Cobbett's radical *Twopenny Trash* broke all circulation records in 1816–17.¹⁷ This record was probably beaten in 1835–36 by the left-wing *Weekly Police Gazette*.¹⁸ In 1838 the militant *Northern Star* gained the largest circulation of any newspaper published in the provinces and, in 1839, the largest circulation in Britain apart from the liberal-radical *Weekly Dispatch*.¹⁹ The *Northern Star*'s circulation was later exceeded by that of the initially radical left *Reynolds's Newspaper*, which in the early 1850s had the second-largest circulation in Britain.²⁰ Along with the liberal-radical *Lloyds Weekly*, *Reynolds's* became the first newspaper to break through the 100,000 circulation barrier in 1856.²¹

Although newspaper circulations during the first half of the nineteenth century seem very small by contemporary standards, this is misleading because circulation is not a constant measure of 'audience'. The sharing of high-cost papers, together with the widespread practice of reading papers aloud for the benefit of the semi-literate and illiterate, inflated the number of 'readers' for each newspaper sold. Informed accounts estimate that radical newspapers had twenty or more readers per copy in the 1830s and 1840s,²² compared with two to three readers per copy of a typical national newspaper today. Yet even if a *very* conservative estimate of ten readers per copy is adopted, this still means that the *Northern Star* and its successor, *Reynolds's Newspaper*, each reached at their peak, before the repeal of the stamp duty, half a million readers. In 1851 the total population of England and Wales was only 18 million. The emergent radical press was thus a genuinely popular force, reaching a large public.

The economic structure of the radical press

While the rise of the radical press was a direct consequence of the growth of trade union and working-class political organisations, it was also enabled by the prevailing economic structure of the press industry. Since this is an important aspect of the central argument that will follow, we will examine in some detail the finances of the early radical press.

The initial capital required to set up a radical paper in the early part of the nineteenth century was extremely small. Most radical unstamped papers were printed not on a steam press, but on hand presses, which cost as little as £10 to acquire. Metal type could be hired by the hour and print workers paid on a piecework basis.

After 1836 leading stamped radical papers were printed on more sophisticated machinery. The *London Dispatch*, for instance, was printed on a Napier machine, bought with the help of a wealthy well-wisher and the profits from Hetherington's other publications. The *Northern Star* had a printing press

specially constructed for it in London. Even so, launch costs were extremely small in comparison with the subsequent period. The *Northern Star*, for instance, was launched in 1837 with a total capital of £690, mostly raised by public subscription.²³

Financing a paper during its initial trading period could often cost more than setting it up. Even so, early losses were minimised by low operating costs. Radical unstamped papers paid no tax, relied heavily upon news reports filed by their readers on a voluntary basis, and had small newsprint costs because of their high readership per copy. Consequently they needed to attain only small circulations in order to be economically viable. Thus, the break-even circulation point for the *Poor Man's Guardian*, a leading newspaper of the early 1830s, was only 2500.²⁴

Even after 1836, when a penny stamp duty had to be paid on each copy, the running costs of the radical press remained relatively low. The influential *London Dispatch* reported, for example, that 'the whole expense allowed for editing, reporting, reviewing, literary contributions etc., in fact, the entire cost of what is technically called "making up" the paper, is only six pounds per week'.²⁵ In the same issue it reported that, at its selling price of three pence, it could break even with a circulation of 16,000. Similarly the *Northern Star* which, unlike its predecessors, developed a substantial network of paid correspondents, spent about £14 a week on editorial costs in 1839–40.²⁶ Selling at four pence, its circulation break-even point was 6200 copies.²⁷ This meant that its run-in costs were small. Indeed the *Northern Star* almost certainly moved into profit within its first month of publication.²⁸

Because publishing costs were low the ownership and control of newspapers could be in the hands of people committed, in the words of Joshua Hobson, an ex-handloom weaver and publisher of the *Voice of West Riding*, 'to support the rights and interests of the order and class to which it is my pride to belong'.²⁹ Some newspapers, such as the *Voice of the People*, the *Liberator* and the *Trades Newspaper*, were owned by political or trade union organisations. Other radical papers were owned by individual proprietors, such as Cleave, Watson and Hetherington, many of them people of humble origins who had risen to prominence through the working-class movement. While not lacking in ruthlessness or business acumen, these publishers tended to entrust the editing of their newspapers to former manual workers like William Hill and Joshua Hobson, or middle-class activists like Bronterre O'Brien and James Lorymer, whose attitudes had been shaped by long involvement in working-class politics. A substantial section of the popular newspaper press reaching a working-class audience was thus controlled by those who were committed to the working-class movement.

This influenced radical journalists' perception of their role. Unlike the institutionalized journalists of the later period, they tended to see themselves as political activists. Indeed, many of the paid correspondents of the *Poor Man's Guardian*, *Northern Star* and the early *Reynolds's Newspaper* doubled up as

political organisers for the National Union of the Working Classes or the Chartist Movement. Instead of reporting the news as discrete events, they sought to understand the underlying dynamics of power and inequality shaping the news. Some also strived to have a reciprocal relationship with their readers. As the editor of the *Northern Star* wrote in its fifth anniversary issue:

I have ever sought to make it [the paper] rather a reflex of your minds than a medium through which to exhibit any supposed talent or intelligence of my own. This is precisely my conception of what a people's organ should be.³⁰

Another important feature of the radical press in the first half of the nineteenth century was that it was self-sufficient on the proceeds of sales alone. As mentioned earlier, the early radical press had limited advertising. The *London Dispatch* complained bitterly of the 'prosecutions, fines and the like et ceteras with which a paper of our principles is sure to be more largely honoured than by the lucrative patronage of advertisers'.³¹ Its resentment, shared by other radical papers, was justified. There was a marked disparity in the amount of advertising duty per 1000 circulation paid by the radical press compared with its rivals. For example, in 1840, two middle-class papers published in Leeds (the *Leeds Mercury* and *Leeds Intelligence*) and the four leading mainstream, national daily papers (*The Times*, *Morning Post*, *Morning Chronicle* and *Morning Advertiser*) each paid over fifty times more advertisement duty per 1000 copies than the popular radical *Northern Star*, a Leeds-based paper with a national circulation.³²

A similar pattern emerges in the case of other leading radical papers. Thus, Cobbett's widely read *Political Register* only obtained three advertisements in 1817, in sharp contrast to its principal rivals. Similarly, the radical *London Dispatch* paid less than half the advertisement duty per 1000 circulation compared with its principal respectable rivals.³³

This limited advertising support meant that the radical press had less money for editorial development than the mainstream press. Yet, notwithstanding this, the radical press still prospered. While fortunes were not easily made, radical newspapers – both stamped and unstamped – could be highly profitable. Hetherington, the publisher of the stamped *London Dispatch*, was reported to be making £1000 a year from his business in 1837.³⁴ Similarly the stamped *Northern Star* was estimated to have produced a profit of £13,000 in 1839 and £6500 in 1840, which was generated very largely from sales revenue.³⁵

This independence from advertising was a liberating force. Radical papers were not under pressure to steer towards an affluent audience, which advertisers would pay more to reach. Nor did radical editors have to worry about upsetting advertisers' political sensibilities. Indeed, by the 1830s, a growing number of radical papers were oriented primarily towards a working-class public, and

became more uncompromisingly oppositional. They were free because they relied on their readers' pennies for their economic viability.

The impact of the radical press

The radical press did not merely reflect the growth of working-class organisations: it also extended their influence. It did this in a number of overlapping ways.

One of the least remarked upon, but most significant, aspects of the development of the radical press in the first half of the nineteenth century was that its leading publications developed a nationwide circulation. Even as early as the second decade, leading radical papers such as the *Political Register* and *Republican* were read as far afield as Yorkshire, Lancashire, the Midlands and East Anglia, as well as in the south of England. By the early 1830s the principal left newspapers like the *Weekly Police Gazette*, the *Poor Man's Guardian* and *Dispatch* had a distribution network extending on a north–south axis from Glasgow to Truro, and on an east–west axis from Norwich to Carmarthen.³⁶ Part of the impact of the radical press stemmed from the geographical extent of its circulation.

Leading radical publications fostered a collective sense of class identity because they provided a means of linking up local working-class communities. They also helped to knit together different groups within the highly stratified working class by demonstrating the common predicament of workers in different trades and occupations throughout the country. People seeking to establish a trade union organisation in their locality could read in the radical press in 1833–34, for instance, of similar struggles by glove workers in Yeovil, cabinet-makers and joiners in Glasgow and Carlisle, shoemakers and smiths in Northampton, bricklayers and masons in London, as well as of groups of workers in Belgium and Germany. Similarly, the radical press helped to reduce geographical isolation by showing that local agitation – whether against the administration of the Poor Law, long working hours or wage cuts – conformed to a common pattern elsewhere. Radical papers further expanded their readers' field of vision by publishing, particularly in the later phase from the 1830s onward, news that other respectable papers tended not to carry. In particular, they drew attention to growing support for the right to vote, and stressed that this was part of a wider struggle to transform society. The radical press was, in the words of the Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor, 'the link that binds the industrious classes together'.³⁷

Radical papers also helped to foster the growth of progressive organisations, like the National Union of the Working Classes and the Chartist Movement, by giving them the oxygen of publicity. O'Connor recalled that before the emergence of Chartist newspapers, 'I found that the press was entirely mute, while I was working myself to death, and that a meeting in one town did nothing for another'.³⁸ Press publicity encouraged people to

attend meetings, and to become involved. It also conferred prominence on leading activists, transforming for example six farm workers in the remote village of Tolpuddle who attempted to start a union in 1832, and who were jailed and transported to Australia, into national working-class martyrs. No less important, radical papers also helped to sustain activists' morale when, at times, it must have been tempting to give up. Without the *Northern Star*, declared one speaker at a local Chartist meeting, 'their own sounds might echo through the wilderness'.³⁹

Leading radical publications were also a mobilizing force in their own right. We have become so accustomed to an individualized pattern of newspaper consumption amid a steady flow of information from a variety of media sources that it is difficult to comprehend the political significance of newspapers in the early nineteenth century. They were often the only regular source of information about what was happening outside the local community. They were important partly because there were few other diversions. Samuel Fielden recalls, for instance, 'on the day the newspaper, the *Northern Star* . . . was due, the people used to line the roadside waiting for its arrival'.⁴⁰ The impact of the radical press was further enhanced by the way in which newspapers read aloud in taverns, workshops, homes and public meetings triggered discussion. This social pattern of consumption continued on a diminished scale until late into the nineteenth century.⁴¹

The rise of the radical press also contributed to – as well as reflected – the radicalization of a section of British society. The first wave of radical papers from the 1790s through to the late 1820s raised expectations both by invoking a mythical past in which plenty and natural justice had prevailed, and by proclaiming the possibility of a future in which poverty could be relieved through political means. It was this raising of hopes, combined with a direct assault on the Anglican 'morality' legitimating social inequality, which especially alarmed parliamentarians at the time. As William Wilmot MP said in the Commons, after being informed that servants and common soldiers had been seen reading radical newspapers:

Those infamous publications . . . inflame [working people's] passions and awaken their selfishness, contrasting their present conditions with what they contend to be their future condition – a condition incompatible with human nature, and with those immutable laws which Providence has established for the regulation of civil society.⁴²

The radical press sought to erode political passivity, based on fatalistic acceptance of the social system as 'natural' and 'providential'. It also attempted to dispel class deference, and a limited sense of entitlement, by subverting the status hierarchy. 'The real strength and all the resources of the country', characteristically proclaimed the *Political Register*, 'ever have sprung from the labour of its people'.⁴³ This labour theory of worth reordered the social ranking

of society. The highest in the land were deemed the lowest as idle parasites: working people, by contrast, were elevated to the top as the most productive and useful section of the community. The early radical press thus symbolically turned the world upside down. It also repeatedly emphasized the potential power of working people to effect change through the force of 'combination' and organised action.

Radical papers also developed a more critical political analysis. The first generation of radical papers tended to be trapped inside the intellectual universe of a standard liberal critique. Political attacks focused on corruption in high places and regressive, direct taxation that was said to impoverish the productive community. This critique implicitly promoted limited political reform in terms of ending corruption and burdensome taxes (and, sometimes, an extension of the franchise) rather than making the case for a far-reaching transformation of the social order. If an underlying conflict in society was depicted, it tended to be between the aristocracy and the 'productive classes' (usually defined to include working employers as well as their employees).

By the 1830s the more militant papers had shifted their focus of attack from 'old corruption' to the economic process which enabled the capitalist class to appropriate in profits the wealth created by labour. Conflict was redefined as a class struggle between labour and capital, between the working classes and a coalition of aristocrats, 'millocrats' and 'shopocrats', sustained by an undemocratic political system. This more radical analysis signposted the way forward towards a radical programme of social reconstruction in which, in the words of the *Poor Man's Guardian*, workers will 'be at the top instead of at the bottom of society – or rather that there should be no bottom or top at all'.⁴⁴

This new analysis was sometimes conflated with the old liberal analysis in an uncertain synthesis. There was, moreover, an underlying continuity in the perspectives offered by the less militant sector of the radical press, which gained in influence during the early 1850s. But such continuity should come as no surprise. It was only natural that the political complexion of the broad left press should reflect the ebb and flow of militancy within the emergent working-class movement. Nor is it at all surprising that traditional political perspectives should have persisted in view of what we now know from communications research about the enduring resilience of belief systems.⁴⁵ But so long as the activist working class controlled its own popular press, it possessed the institutional means to explore and develop more radical understandings of society. It also had a collective resource for defining, expressing and maintaining a radical public opinion different from that proclaimed by the mainstream press. And it possessed a shield, however imperfect, to fend off the ideological assault mounted through schools, the Anglican Church, mechanics' institutes and useful knowledge magazines.

The rise of the militant press fostered the development of a radical subculture, posing a challenge to the undemocratic social order. Indeed, in 1842, a General Strike was called to secure universal suffrage through the force of industrial action. It received extensive support in industrial Lancashire, much of Yorkshire and parts of the Midlands.⁴⁶ While the strike was crushed, and some 1500 activist leaders were imprisoned, it was a sign of an increasingly unsettled society in which radical publications had become a disruptive force.

In short, the control system administered by the state had failed. Neither prosecutions for seditious libel nor a tax system designed to restrict newspaper readership had succeeded in preventing the rise of the radical press. As we shall see, this prompted thoughtful parliamentarians to consider whether there might be a better way to contain the threat posed by insurgent journalism.

Notes

- 1 A. Aspinall, *Politics and the Press, c. 1780–1850* (Brighton, Harvester, 1973 [1949]); I. Christie, *Myth and Reality in Late Eighteenth Century British Politics* (London, Macmillan, 1970); I. Asquith, 'Advertising and the press in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: James Perry and the *Morning Chronicle* 1790–1821', *Historical Journal*, xviii (4), 1975, pp. 703–24; G. Cranfield, *The Press and Society* (London, Longman, 1978); S. Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain*, vol. 1 (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1981); H. Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 1695–1855* (Harlow, Longman, 2000), among others.
- 2 Cited in Aspinall, *Politics and the Press*, p. 380.
- 3 See Chapter 4, p. 38 and Chapter 5, p. 50.
- 4 W. Wickwar, *The Struggle for the Freedom of the Press 1819–1832* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1928), p. 94.
- 5 Cited in J. Wiener, *The War of the Unstamped* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1969), p. 196.
- 6 Derived from Wickwar, *The Struggle*, Appendix B, p. 315.
- 7 J. Black, *The English Press 1621–1861* (Stroud, Sutton, 2001), p. 166.
- 8 Castlereagh, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. XCI (London, Hansard, 1819), col. 1177.
- 9 Castlereagh, *ibid.*, col. 1177. The measure was fine-tuned, Lord Ellenborough also explained, not to undermine 'the respectable press' but to target the 'pauper press . . . administering to the prejudices and passions of the mob' (L. Ellenborough, *Parl. Deb.*, 1820, col. 1591).
- 10 P. Hollis, *The Pauper Press* (London, Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 171.
- 11 T. Spring. Rice, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CXXXVIII (1855), col. 966.
- 12 T. Spring. Rice, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. XXIV (1836), col. 627–28.
- 13 This conservative estimate is based on the aggregate 200,000 circulation of six leading unstamped newspapers in 1836 (Hollis, *Pauper*, p. 124), assuming an average readership of ten per copy. In fact, there were many more than six unstamped newspapers (see Wiener, *War*, pp. 281–85), and per copy readership would have been higher.
- 14 T. Spring. Rice, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. XXIV (1836), col. 627–31.

- 15 T. Spring. Rice, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. XXXVII (1837), col. 1165.
- 16 *London Dispatch*, 17 September 1836.
- 17 Wickwar, *Struggle*, p. 54.
- 18 Wiener, *War*, p. 184.
- 19 *Report from the Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps* (SCNS), Parliamentary Papers XVII (London, Hansard, 1851), Appendix 4.
- 20 V. Berridge, 'Popular Sunday papers and mid-Victorian society' in Boyce et al. (eds.) *Newspaper History*, Fig. 1, p. 263.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Hollis (*Pauper*, p. 119) estimates perhaps twenty readers per copy for unstamped papers in the early 1830s, with supporting evidence. Readership per copy would probably have been greater for their higher priced successors between 1836 and 1855. Indeed, higher contemporary estimates of newspaper readership per copy are reported for the first half of the nineteenth century in D. Read, *Press and People* (London, Arnold, 1961), p. 202; and R. K. Webb, *The British Working Class Reader, 1790–1848* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1955), pp. 31–34.
- 23 Read, *Press*, p. 99. However, J. A. Epstein ('Feargus O'Connor and the *Northern Star*', *International Review of Social History*, xxi, 1976, p. 57) sifts through conflicting evidence to conclude that Feargus O'Connor donated a further £400 towards the paper's establishment.
- 24 See Hollis, *Pauper*, p. 132.
- 25 *London Dispatch*, 17 September 1836.
- 26 Epstein, 'Feargus O'Connor', p. 83.
- 27 Read, *Press*, p. 101.
- 28 Epstein, 'Feargus O'Connor', p. 56.
- 29 Cited Hollis, *Pauper*, p. 94.
- 30 *Northern Star*, 19 November 1842.
- 31 *London Dispatch*, 17 September 1836.
- 32 For this and other comparisons, see J. Curran, 'Capitalism and control of the press, 1800–1975' in J. Curran, M. Gurevitch and J. Woolcott (eds.) *Mass Communication and Society* (London, Edward Arnold, 1977), Table 1, p. 209.
- 33 Derived from *Parliamentary Accounts and Papers*, 1818 and 1838; and SCNS, 1851, Appendix 4 (consolidated stamp duty returns).
- 34 Hollis, *Pauper*, p. 135.
- 35 A. Schoyen, *The Chartist Challenge* (London, Heinemann, 1956), p. 133.
- 36 Hollis, *Pauper*, pp. 108–16.
- 37 *Northern Star*, 16 January 1841.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 *Northern Star*, 18 August 1838.
- 40 S. Fielden, *Knights of Labour*, 1887 cited by Epstein, 'Feargus O'Connor', p. 72.
- 41 J. Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002), Chapter 2.
- 42 W. Wilmot, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. XCI (1819), col. 1358. This quotation was wrongly attributed in previous editions to Dr. Joseph Phillimore, MP, due to a transcription error. Phillimore spoke shortly after William Wilmot, and said similar things, including the need to curb 'publications so destructive to the happiness of mankind in this life and hereafter' (col. 1363).

- 43 *Political Register*, 1816, cited by N. W. Thompson, *The People's Science* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 112.
- 44 *Poor Man's Guardian*, 19 October 1833.
- 45 J. Curran, *Media and Power* (London, Routledge, 2002).
- 46 J. Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1976).

Janus face of reform

The campaign against 'the taxes on knowledge' is generally portrayed as a triumphant struggle for press freedom, sustained by special interests but motivated largely by libertarian ideals in opposition to the authoritarian legacy of the past.¹ The only discordant note in this inspiring legend comes from the parliamentary campaigners it celebrates. Their aims and, indeed, their public utterances are difficult to reconcile with how they have been depicted in Whig history.

Dividing over social control

Press taxes became a recurrent subject of debate in parliament during the early 1830s, producing a sharp divergence of opinion. Defenders of the stamp duty argued that it limited the distribution of 'pernicious and mischievous' ideas by making newspapers more expensive.² They also pointed out that press taxes forced up the costs of publishing, and ensured that ownership of the press was restricted to the wealthy. As the Conservative MP, John Cresset Pelham, argued in 1832, press duties were:

eminently useful in their effects, as newspapers were thus placed under the control of men of wealth and character who, for their own sakes, would conduct them in a more responsible manner than was likely to be the result of a pauper management'.³

All that needed to change, in his view, was that the government should be more vigorous in enforcing the law.

A minority group in parliament rejected this, arguing that the stamp duty had failed to 'prevent the circulation of the most dangerous doctrines',⁴ and had become unenforceable. Radical publishers were not being silenced by ineffectual controls: instead they were being given a clear field without encountering competition in the form of a cheap reply from responsible publishers.⁵

This clash of opinion was often informed by a different approach to social control. Traditionalists tended to support a law-and-order approach, whereas

opponents of press taxes tended to argue that public education was needed to stabilize the social system. Typical of this latter group was Edward Bulwer-Lytton who, when proposing the abolition of the stamp duty in 1832, declared cynically:

At this moment when throughout so many nations we see the people at war with their institutions, the world presents to us two great, may they be impressive examples. In Denmark, a despotism without discontent – in America, a republic without change. The cause is the same in both: in both the people are universally educated.⁶

Abolition of the stamp duty would produce, he argued, a cheap press that would put to flight ‘those superficial and dangerous notions of the injustice of the divisions of property, which men who are both poor and ignorant so naturally conceive . . .’.⁷ This belief that popular journalism, in responsible hands, would defeat radicalism, rooted in ignorance, lay at the heart of the 1830s parliamentary campaign against the stamp duty. Francis Place, the organising secretary of the repeal campaign, told a Parliamentary Select Committee in 1832 that ‘there would not have been a single trades union either in England or Scotland’ if the stamp duty had been repealed earlier.⁸ Similarly John Roebuck informed the Commons that, if the stamp duty had been lifted, agricultural workers at Tolpuddle would probably not have wanted to establish a trade union.⁹ Another leading campaigner, George Grote, was even more sanguine about the benefits of an expanded, capitalist press: ‘a great deal of the bad feeling that was at present abroad amongst the labouring classes on the subject of wages’ was due, he believed, to ‘the want of proper instruction and correct information as to their real interests’ which the repeal of the stamp duty and the creation of a cheap, respectable press would rectify.¹⁰

The parliamentary clashes over the stamp duty in the 1830s were not about liberty. The two opposing sides in parliament were equally committed to conscripting the press to the social order: where they differed was how this should be done. As the Lord Chancellor, Lord Brougham, succinctly summarized in 1834:

The only question to answer, and the only problem to solve, is how they [the people] shall read in the best manner; how they shall be instructed politically, and have habits formed the most safe for the constitution of the country.¹¹

The majority of MPs concluded that the stamp duty should be retained because it provided a defence against radical subversion. The minority who disagreed was relatively small, never mustering during the 1830s more than 58 votes, even when the Commons was elected on an extended franchise.¹² Indeed, their opposition was sometimes hesitant, betraying anxiety that the

time might not be ripe for repeal; and it subsided once the radical unstamped press was defeated in 1836.

Ambiguity was a continuing feature of the parliamentary campaign against press taxes. Collet Dobson Collet said of the 1836 reduction of the stamp duty, and assault on the unstamped press, that it was 'not a liberal, but it was, in some respects, a statesman-like measure'.¹³ This was scarcely a ringing defence of press freedom. Yet, Collet was to become the principal organiser of the parliamentary campaign against press taxes, when it was re-established in 1848.¹⁴

Ambiguity of the renewed campaign

Martin Hewitt is the latest historian to bathe this revived campaign in a heroic light as being inspired essentially by a love of liberty, and to conclude that its success was wholly beneficent.¹⁵ He does this, in a full-length monograph, by documenting with innovative scholarship the popular tail of the reform campaign, pointing to 'the more complicated and unruly tendencies of activists, supporters and fellow travellers'.¹⁶ He also concludes that the cheap press that emerged after the abolition of press taxes lessened prejudice against popular journalism, and was a positive, integrative force.¹⁷ His study ends with an exultant quotation from the veteran Manchester Liberal politician, John Bright, who looked back with pleasure in 1872 on how securing the 'freedom of the press' had the 'beneficial' impact which he and fellow campaigners had foretold.¹⁸

The trouble with this study, like others before it, is that it largely ignores what was being said at the time in parliament. It pays too little attention to changes in the wider context that made repeal acceptable. Above all, it is blind to the way in which press capitalism gave rise to a new form of censorship.

While the revived parliamentary campaign was presented at times as a people's crusade, it was led primarily by middle class Liberal politicians, mostly with business backgrounds. As Richard Cobden, a northern manufacturer and Liberal MP for Stockport – and one of the campaign's leading lights – confided privately, 'exclusively almost, we comprise steady, sober middle-class reformers'.¹⁹ He and other like-minded colleagues created the Association for the Promotion of the Repeal of the Taxes on Knowledge (APRTOK), with the ubiquitous Collet as its organising Secretary. Significantly, this was established not as a national pressure group with branches and grassroots membership, but as a centralized lobbying organisation, which industrial Liberal MPs, and their close allies, sought to control.²⁰

A powerful motivation for this revived campaign was the belief that the repeal of press taxes would give rise to a popular press propagating the principles of free trade and competitive capitalism. In particular, these Liberal MPs hoped that it would lead to the growth of a sympathetic local press, and the launch of a successful, national rival to the dominant but unreliable

The Times. They felt that the wind of change was behind them. They had recently run a triumphant campaign that had led, in 1846, to the abolition of the Corn Laws (tariffs and restrictions on imported grain that had artificially inflated bread prices in the interests of farmers). The political platform and mass meeting should now be supplemented, they believed, by cheap newspapers in order to spread the gospel of economic liberalism.

Some of the people involved in the renewed fight against press taxes were also engaged in the parliamentary struggle to establish free public libraries (secured in principle in 1850). Their belief was that enhanced access to knowledge would promote the advance of reason, and confound the forces of moral depravity and political subversion. In the words of the 1849 Select Committee on Public Libraries, free libraries would 'lessen or perhaps entirely destroy the influence of frivolous, unsound and dangerous works'.²¹

These reformers put together a broad-based coalition of interests to campaign against press taxes. This included educationalists, temperance campaigners and post-Chartist radicals; advocates of lower taxation and public retrenchment; and also a motley group of Conservative parliamentarians (including Whig Conservatives like Bulwer-Lytton, populist Conservatives like Disraeli who believed that the abolition of the advertisement duty would boost a popular conservative press, and opportunists chafing at *The Times*' repeated criticism of the Aberdeen coalition administration); and the press itself (though publishers were split over the stamp duty).²² The composition of this coalition fluctuated, depending partly upon which press tax the campaign targeted.

But while backing came from diverse sources with different objectives, leading campaigners against press taxes *in parliament* had a shared vision. They believed that the social order would be rendered more secure if it was based on consent fostered by a cheap press. 'The larger we open the field of general instruction', declared Palmerston when speaking for the repeal of the stamp duty, 'the firmer the foundations on which the order, the loyalty and good conduct of the lower classes will rest'.²³ 'The freedom of the press', argued Gladstone, 'was not merely to be permitted and tolerated, but to be highly prized, for it tended to bring closer together all the national interests and preserve the institutions of the country'.²⁴ Repeal the taxes on knowledge, proclaimed the Irish politician John Maguire, and 'you render the people better citizens, more obedient to the laws, more faithful and loyal subjects, and more determined to stand up for the honour of the country'.²⁵ A cheap press, in other words, would strengthen the social system.

This was similar to the arguments aired in parliament during the 1830s. However, the rhetoric of the 1850s campaign was sometimes pitched in a more progressive register than before. Supporters of press taxes were stigmatized as enemies of liberty and the heirs of court censorship. Knowledge, it was proclaimed, should not be taxed; good publications would drive out the bad in open competition.²⁶

This could give rise to a discourse in which libertarian and authoritarian themes mingled incongruously together. For example, Alexander Andrews, editor of the first journalists' trade journal, wrote that the great mission of a free press was to 'educate and enlighten those classes whose political knowledge has been hitherto so little, and by consequence so dangerous'. This stress on political indoctrination was combined with an invocation to liberty. 'The list of our public journals', Andrews continued, 'is a proud and noble list – the roll call of an army of liberty, with a rallying point in every town. It is a police of safety, and a sentinel of public morals'.²⁷

This juxtaposition of 'freedom' and 'control' illuminated the ideological universe of many mid-nineteenth-century free press campaigners. It was tacitly assumed that there was no conflict of interest between classes: merely a conflict between ignorance and enlightenment, and between the individual and the state. Viewed from this perspective, an expanded capitalist press was to be welcomed because it would be both a guard-dog shepherding the people from radical heresy, and a watchdog restraining the state from encroaching on individual liberty.

Informing this approach was a conviction that the repeal of press taxes would enable a middle class version of enlightenment to prevail. The growth of a cheap press, explained William Hickson, a leading campaigner, would enlist journalists 'two or three degrees' above workers to instruct them.²⁸ To Gladstone, the principal attraction of repeal was that more men of 'quality' would be employed in an expanded press to educate the people.²⁹ 'A perfectly free press is one of the greatest safeguards of peace and order', wryly observed the lawyer, J. F. Stephen, because journalists come from 'the comfortable part of society, and will err rather on the side of making too much of their interests than on that of neglecting them'.³⁰

Some senior campaigners also had close links to the local press, and understood how newspaper markets functioned. The repeal of press taxes, declared Thomas Milner Gibson, APRTOK President, would create 'a cheap press in the hands of men of good moral character, of respectability, and of capital'.³¹ The free market, according to Sir George Lewis, the Liberal Chancellor of the Exchequer, would promote papers 'enjoying the preference of the advertising public'.³² A cheap press in responsible hands, it was believed, would also educate demand. As one veteran campaigner put it, 'the appetite grows by what it feeds on'.³³

But if one motivation behind reform was the conviction that an unfettered capitalist press would be in responsible hands, another was a growing sense – absent in the turbulent, early 1830s – that the public would be receptive to instruction. The campaign to repeal press taxes, though revived in 1848, only really took off in 1850–51 when it became increasingly apparent that the Chartist movement had failed. By then, a conservative reaction had also set in after the 1848 upheavals that had rocked much of Europe. There was,

proclaimed Edward Bulwer-Lytton without a trace of irony, 'a great increase of intelligence among the people.'³⁴

Changed times altered the calculation of risk. It was because the government was now confident of 'the loyalty and good disposition of the great body of the people', declared Sir George Lewis, Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1855, that he was proposing the abolition of the stamp duty.³⁵ This reassurance was repeated regularly by reformers. They urged those who were uncertain whether the working class would 'become the glory, or might prove greatly dangerous, to the peace of the country, and the prosperity of its industry' to seize this propitious moment to create a cheap press.³⁶

However, those convinced that the lower orders were inherently susceptible to radical ideas stood firm. They included not only traditionalists but some who might have been thought to be natural allies of Manchester Liberals. Thus the liberal political economist, J. R. McCulloch, supported free trade in general but not in relation to the press. He refused to believe that 'circulation of low-priced journals can ever be of advantage' because 'the lower and poorer classes' were wedded, in his view, to 'prejudices' inconsistent with 'the interests of society in general'.³⁷ But the people who thought like this – though dominant in the 1830s – had ceased to be in the majority in parliament by the 1850s because working-class militancy had been defeated.³⁸

The momentum for reform was skilfully exploited by the seasoned campaigners who led the struggle against press taxes. They initiated a Commons Select Committee on the Stamp Duty (and largely wrote its Report), won allies among civil servants, harried sometimes poorly briefed ministers, organised public meetings, petitions and deputations, wrote press articles and proposed Bills in parliament. Their virtuosity was rewarded with the abolition of the advertisement duty in 1853, the stamp duty in 1855, the paper duty in 1861 and the financial security system in 1869.³⁹

In short, the campaign in parliament for a free press independent of state economic control was not inspired by a love of freedom, in a contemporary sense. Paradoxically, people supported the enforcement of the stamp duty in 1836 for much the same reason that they voted for its repeal in 1855. On both occasions, they were unwavering in their concern to ensure that the press underpinned the social order. But in the meantime public discontent had subsided, and there was a growing sense of security within the governing class. There was also a greater commitment to positive indoctrination of the lower orders through education and a cheap press, and an increasing conviction that free trade and normative controls were morally preferable and more efficient than coercive controls administered by the state.

In the event, reformers were vindicated. The radical press was eclipsed in the period after the repeal of press taxes. The reasons for this have never been properly explained, and will now be explored.

Notes

- 1 For example, G. A. Cranfield, *The Press and Society* (Harlow, Longman, 1978), p. 205.
- 2 L. Althorp, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. XXIII (London, Hansard, 1834), col. 1212.
- 3 J. Cresset Pelham, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. XI (1832), col. 492.
- 4 E. Lytton Bulwer, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. XIII (1832), col. 624. He became known subsequently as Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and later Lord Lytton.
- 5 This sounded plausible but was misleading. In actual practice, the authorities harassed radical unstamped papers, while increasingly turning a blind eye to their more respectable, unstamped rivals.
- 6 E. Lytton Bulwer, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. XIII (1832), col. 633.
- 7 E. Lytton Bulwer, *ibid.*, col. 621.
- 8 F. Place, Select Committee on Drunkenness, *Parliamentary Papers*, vol. viii (1834), question 2054.
- 9 J. Roebuck, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. XXIII (1834), col. 1208.
- 10 G. Grote, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. XXIII (1834), col. 1221.
- 11 Cited in E. P. Thompson, *The Struggle for a Free Press* (People's Press, 1952 (April)), p. 14.
- 12 Their largest vote was on 22 May 1834 [*Parl. Deb.*, vol. XXIII (1834), col. 1222].
- 13 C. Collet, *History of the Taxes on Knowledge*, abridged edition (London, Watts, 1933), p. 29.
- 14 Collet was successively Secretary of the People's Charter Union, Newspaper Stamp Abolition Committee and the Association for the Promotion of the Repeal of the Taxes on Knowledge.
- 15 M. Hewitt, *The Dawn of the Cheap Press in Victorian Britain* (London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 127 and p. 171.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 178.
- 19 Cited in C. Collet, *History of the Taxes on Knowledge*, vol. 2, 1st edition (London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1899), p. 207.
- 20 Hewitt, *The Dawn*, p. 42. He notes, however, that they lost control after 1855 (see pp. 171 ff.).
- 21 Select Committee on Public Libraries (1849), p. vii cited in A. Black, *A New History of the English Public Library* (London, Leicester University Press, 1996).
- 22 Different reasons for supporting repeal of specific press taxes are expressed for instance by A. Haywood, Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps (SCNS), *Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 17 (1851), paragraphs 658 ff; M. Whitty, SCNS, par. 688; B. Disraeli, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CXXV (1853), col. 1178; E. Bulwer-Lytton, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CXXXVII (1855), col. 1128; J. Bright, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CXXV (1853), col. 1160; T. Milner Gibson, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CXXV (1853), col. 1131–32; W. Ewart, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CXXV (1853), col. 1145; among others.
- 23 Palmerston, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CXXXVI (1854), col. 459.
- 24 W. Gladstone, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CXXXVII (1855), col. 794.
- 25 J. Maguire, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CLVII (1860), col. 383.
- 26 For example, J. Bright, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CXXV (1853), col. 1160; T. Milner Gibson, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CXXV (1853), col. 1131–32; Marquess of Clanricarde, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CLVII (1860), col. 1495.

- 27 A. Andrews, *The History of British Journalism to 1855*, vol. 2 (London, Richard Bentley, 1859), p. 347. The latent authoritarianism lurking within this 'progressive' championship of a free press and public education never really rose to the surface because predictions about the moderating effects of progressive reform were largely fulfilled in Britain. It was a different matter in India where the Viceroy, Lord Bulwer Lytton, reiterated his father's view that the spread of education and a free press would lead to political moderation, only to discover that the more educated the Indians were, the more critical they seemed to be of British rule. He then resorted to heavy-handed press censorship. See the classic pioneering study: A. Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 143–46.
- 28 W. Hickson, Report of the Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps, *Parliamentary Papers*, vol. 17 (1851), par. 3197.
- 29 P. Magnus, *Gladstone* (London, Murray, 1963), p. 152.
- 30 Anon [J. F. Stephen], 'Journalism', *Cornhill Magazine*, 6, 1862, p. 58.
- 31 T. Milner Gibson, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CXXVII (1854), col. 434.
- 32 Sir G. Lewis, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CXXXVII (1855), col. 786.
- 33 M. Whitty, Report of the Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps, *Parliamentary Papers*, vol. XVII (1851), par. 600.
- 34 E. Bulwer-Lytton, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CXXXVII (1855), col. 1118.
- 35 Sir G. Lewis, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CXXXVII (1855), col. 782.
- 36 J. Bright, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CXXVII (1853), col. 1118; cf. J. Roebuck, *Parl. Deb.*, vol. CXXVII (1853), col. 407.
- 37 J. R. McCulloch, *Dictionary of Commerce and Commercial Navigation* (London, Longman, Brown and Green, 1854), p. 893.
- 38 For an illuminating account of the subsequent evolution of this debate about whether the people could be trusted, see H. Cunningham, *The Challenge of Democracy* (Harlow, Pearson Education, 2001).
- 39 This drama is well told in Collet, *History*, vols. 1–2, and usefully rendered more complex by Hewitt, *The Dawn*.

Industrialization of the press

During the half-century following the repeal of the ‘taxes on knowledge’, a number of radical newspapers closed down or were eventually incorporated into the mainstream of popular Liberal journalism. Militant journalism survived only in the etiolated form of small-circulation national periodicals and struggling local weeklies.¹ Yet this decline occurred during a period of rapid press expansion, when local daily papers were established in all the major urban centres of Britain and a new generation of predominantly right-wing national newspapers came into being. These included newspapers such as the *People* (1881), *Daily Mail* (1896), *Daily Express* (1900) and *Daily Mirror* (1903), which were to play a prominent role in British journalism.

Most historians attribute the decline of radical journalism to a change in the climate of public opinion.² The collapse of Chartism in the early 1850s produced a wave of disillusion. Some radical activists were absorbed into the Liberal Party or withdrew from the political scene. Some trade unions became more inward looking, seeking merely to improve wages and working conditions. Intensive proselytization of the working class through schools, churches, youth clubs, music hall and the press fostered patriotic and imperialist attitudes, and the spread of anti-socialist views.

Yet, even though the British state remained only quasi-democratic,³ it introduced significant social reforms ranging from a major extension of workplace protection (1867) through to the introduction of free elementary education (1870) and legal support for women’s rights (1870 and 1882). Crucially, the sustained growth of the British economy led also to the rise of workers’ wages and a reduction of working hours.⁴ In this context of social improvement, the Liberal and Conservative parties became mass political movements, marginalizing for a time the left.

These developments reduced consumer demand for militant journalism. They also had another consequence extending into the early twentieth century, which has tended to be overlooked. The decline of support for the left made it more difficult to raise money within the working-class movement for new radical publishing ventures. Liberal and Lib–Lab trade unionists were

reluctant to invest their members' money in setting up new socialist publications, because they had become reconciled to the commercial press.⁵

However, while a 'zeitgeist' interpretation goes some way to explaining the fall of the radical press, it is an incomplete explanation. It is generally based on the over-simplistic assumption that market competition causes the press to reflect the views of the public. This is only partly the case. Thus, the radical press was still a force in popular journalism in 1860 when the radical movement had been decisively defeated. In sharp contrast, the radical press was dwarfed by its rivals in 1910, a time when the radical movement had made a comeback. The steady growth of general trade unionism, the radicalization of skilled workers, the spread of socialist and Labourist ideas, the rise of the suffragette movement and the revival of industrial militancy did not give rise to a substantial radical press in the early twentieth century, although it produced a few notable publications.⁶ The absence of a close correspondence between press and public opinion is further underlined by subsequent voting figures. In the 1918 general election, the Labour Party gained 22 per cent of the vote but did not have the support of a single national daily newspaper.⁷ So, while wider changes in politics and public attitudes go some way towards explaining the decline of radical journalism, other factors also need to be identified.

Lucy Brown advances a further explanation for the editorial realignment of the Victorian press. The political elite, she argues, became more adept at managing the press, and more influential in the sourcing and framing of news about public affairs. But while this helps to explain why the later Victorian press, in her words, 'declined in critical vigour',⁸ it still does not account for the extent of the change that took place. The radical press's adversarial politics effectively inoculated it against the gentler arts of press management described by Brown. The defeat of militant journalism was more fundamental: its publications were eclipsed rather than seduced.

Virginia Berridge supplies another explanation of the decline of committed journalism. This was due, she argues, to the 'commercialisation' of the popular press. New popular papers came into being which were primarily business ventures, relying on sensationalist manipulation of popular sentiment rather than on what Berridge calls the 'genuine arousal' of authentic radical journalism.⁹ In other words, they concentrated on populist entertainment rather than on political analysis, and consequently secured a much larger audience.

Berridge's pioneering analysis focuses attention upon *Reynolds's Newspaper* as an illustration of this shift. However, her general argument applies more widely to popular Sunday papers. The circulation of the quasi-radical press during the 1840s was swollen by the emergence of the *News of the World* and *Lloyd's Weekly*, both commercial papers whose initial radicalism was the product more of commercial expediency than of political commitment. As the *News of the World* frankly stated in its first issue, 'It is only by a very extensive circulation that the proprietors can be compensated for the outlay of a large

capital in this novel and original undertaking'. Although the same issue contained an impassioned attack on conditions in some poor-houses, where inmates were forced to wear prison clothes, the paper also made clear that its general orientation was to please as many people as possible by serving 'the general utility of all classes'.¹⁰ This led to the adoption of mainstream liberal politics, and an increasing stress on entertainment. Yet, not very surprisingly, Sunday papers like the *News of the World* and *Lloyd's Weekly*, with a professionally processed combination of news and entertainment, proved more appealing than the didactic journals that were the principal organs of the left in late Victorian Britain.

This explanation is persuasive as far as it goes. But it glosses over one striking feature of the development of the early radical press. During the first half of the nineteenth century left-wing papers evolved from being journals of opinion, based on a quarto format, into broadsheet newspapers carrying news as well as commentary. This change was particularly marked during the 1830s, and was accompanied by a significant broadening of editorial content. Some of these radical papers began to develop a wider audience appeal by drawing upon the popular street literature tradition of chapbooks, broadsheets, gallowsheets and almanacs.¹¹ Indeed, *Cleave's Weekly Police Gazette*, the *London Dispatch* and the early militant *Reynolds's Newspaper* were important partly because they started to rework this cultural tradition in ways that projected a radical perspective through entertainment (in particular crime reporting) not just through political coverage.

Why, then, did the committed radical press retreat increasingly in the second half of the nineteenth century into the ghetto of narrowly politicized journalism? Why did it leave the field of popular news coverage and entertainment to the commercial press? Thus the question that needs to be asked is not why Victorian working people should have preferred the *News of the World* to rather arid socialist journals such as *Justice* and *Commonweal*, but why the radical press should have failed to live up to its early promise (or, in Berridge's perspective, to its debased populism).

Her analysis is a historical version of a standard critique of mass culture. This assumes that communication processed commercially as a *commodity* for the mass market is inevitably impoverished because it relies on the manipulation of public tastes and attitudes for profit. This is based on an underlying premise that is open to question. In the context of Victorian Britain, it also obscures under the general heading of 'commercialisation' the complex system of controls institutionalized by the industrialization of the Victorian press.

The freedom of capital

One of the central objectives of state economic controls on the press – to exclude pauper management – was attained only by its repeal. The development of an unfettered free market raised publishing costs in a way that

prevented groups of workers, or individuals with limited resources, from owning newspapers.

This was partly because an industrial system of production replaced a largely craft-based one. The lifting of press taxes set up a chain reaction: lower prices, increased sales and the development of new print technology to service an expanding market. Rotary presses, fed by hand, were introduced in the 1860s and 1870s and were gradually replaced by web rotary machines of increasing size and sophistication in late Victorian and Edwardian England. 'Craft' composing was mechanized by Hattersley's machine in the 1860s, and this was replaced by the linotype machine in the 1880s and 1890s. Numerous innovations were also made in graphic reproduction. These developments led to a sharp rise in fixed capital costs. For example, Northcliffe estimated half a million pounds as 'the initial cost of machinery, buildings, ink factories and the like, and this was altogether apart from the capital required for daily working expenses' in setting up the *Daily Mail* in 1896.¹²

The rise in fixed costs made it more difficult for people with limited funds to break into mass publishing. It also brought into play economies of scale and scope that favoured large publishers. Big circulation newspapers were able to spread their large 'first large copy' costs over a large print run. This reduced the unit cost of each copy, giving them a competitive advantage over their smaller rivals. In addition, some large groups gained the advantages of consolidation. Edward Lloyd led the way by both publishing multiple titles in the same site, and diversifying in the 1870s and 1880s into paper manufacture. However, while new technology raised the level of investment needed to start a paper, and tended to strengthen the position of major publishers, it did not in fact constitute an insuperable obstacle to the launch of new publications with limited capital, even in the national market. Newspapers such as the *Daily Herald*, launched in 1912, could still be started with only a limited outlay by being printed on a contract basis by an independent printer.

A more important financial consequence of the repeal of press taxes was to increase the *operating* costs of newspaper publishing. National newspapers became substantial enterprises, with growing newsprint bills and staff costs, during a period when cover prices were repeatedly cut. This forced up the circulation levels that newspapers needed to achieve in order to be profitable. This raised, in turn, the run-in costs of new ventures. New newspapers could be launched with limited funds and derelict newspapers could be bought relatively cheaply. It was increasingly the cost of funding trading losses before newspapers became established as profitable enterprises that required substantial capital (and the ability to access substantial credit).

Thus in 1855 Disraeli was advised that a capital of about £20,000 was needed to start a London daily paper.¹³ In 1867 W. H. Smith estimated that about £50,000 was necessary to fund a new London morning paper.¹⁴ By the 1870s Edward Lloyd needed to spend £150,000 to establish the *Daily Chronicle* (after buying it for £30,000).¹⁵ During the period 1906 to 1908 Thomasson

spent about £300,000 attempting to establish the Liberal daily, *Tribune*.¹⁶ By the 1920s, Lord Cowdray spent about £750,000 attempting to convert the *Westminster Gazette* into a quality daily.¹⁷ Even more was spent on developing mass-circulation papers during the same period.

Indeed, the full extent of the material transformation of the press is perhaps most clearly revealed by comparing the launch and establishment costs of newspapers before and after the introduction of mass production. As we have seen, the total cost of establishing the *Northern Star* as a leading national weekly newspaper on a profitable basis in 1837 was around £1000.¹⁸ It broke even with a circulation of about 6200 copies, which was probably achieved in its first month. In contrast the *Sunday Express*, launched in 1918, had over £2 million spent on it before it broke even, and this needed a circulation of well over 250,000 to be profitable.¹⁹ Thus, while a public subscription in northern towns was sufficient to launch a national weekly in the 1830s, it required the resources of an international conglomerate controlled by Beaverbrook to do the same thing nearly a century later.

These statistics illustrate the privileged position of capital in the creation of the modern press. Even when the cost of launching and establishing a popular paper was still relatively low in the 1860s, it exceeded the resources readily available to the organised working class. *The Bee-Hive*, for instance, was started in 1862 with capital of less than £250 raised by trade union organisations and a well-to-do sympathizer. Although its founders initially aspired to reach a wider audience by carrying both news and features, lack of funds forced them to create a low-cost weekly journal of opinion for a minority audience. Despite a small amount of additional capital put up by unions and other contributors, *the Bee-Hive* also had to sell at double the price of the large-circulation weeklies they had originally wanted to compete against. In effect, its under-capitalization confined it to the margins of national publishing as a specialist, if influential, weekly paper.²⁰

The rise in publishing costs helps to explain why the committed left press in the late nineteenth century existed only as under-capitalized, low-budget, high-price specialist periodicals and as local community papers, an important but as yet relatively undocumented aspect of the residual survival of the radical press.²¹ The operation of the free market had raised the cost of press ownership beyond the readily available resources of the working class.

As the resources of organised labour increased, so did the costs of publishing. It was not until 1912 that papers financed and controlled from within the working class made their first appearance in national daily journalism – long after popular national daily papers had become well established. The brief career of the *Daily Citizen* and the early history of the *Daily Herald* illustrate the economic obstacles to setting up papers under working-class control. The *Daily Citizen*, launched in 1912 with a capital of only £30,000 (provided mainly by trade unions), reached a circulation of 250,000 at its peak within two years and was only 50,000 short of overhauling the *Daily Express*.

But although the *Daily Citizen* almost certainly acquired more working-class readers than any other daily, it was still forced to close in 1915 for lack of funds.²²

The more left-wing *Daily Herald*, starting with only £300 and sustained by public donations, lurched from one crisis to another despite reaching a circulation of over 250,000 at its meridian before 1914. On one occasion, when the *Daily Herald* could no longer afford to buy paper, it came out in pages of different sizes and shapes after old discarded paper supplies were 'found'. On another occasion, it acquired small quantities of paper under fictitious names from suppliers all over the country. Later it secured paper supplies without a guarantee by threatening to organise, through its trade union connections, industrial action against paper manufacturers.²³ While the *Daily Citizen* closed, the *Daily Herald* survived by switching from being a daily to becoming a weekly during the period 1914–19. Lack of sufficient capital prevented its continuation in any other form.

Market forces thus accomplished more than the most repressive measures of an aristocratic state. The security system introduced in 1819 to ensure that the press was controlled by men of 'respectability and capital' had fixed the financial qualifications of press ownership at a mere £200 to £300. This financial hurdle was raised over a hundredfold by the market system between 1850 and 1920.²⁴

However, although the heavy capitalization of the British press was an important factor inhibiting the launch of new radical papers, it still does not explain the ideological absorption of radical papers already in existence before the repeal of the press taxes. Nor does it fully explain why small-circulation radical papers did not grow into profitable mass-circulation papers and accumulate sufficient capital, through retained profits, to finance new publications. For an answer to these questions we need to look elsewhere.

The new licensing system: advertising

The crucial element of the new control system was the strategic role acquired by advertisers after the repeal of the advertisement duty in 1853. Before then, the advertisement tax had made certain forms of advertising uneconomic. As John Cassell, the publisher of popular useful knowledge publications, argued before the Parliamentary Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps, the advertisement duty 'prevents a certain class of advertisements from appearing: it is only such as costly books and property sales by auction that really afford an opportunity of advertising and for paying the duty'.²⁵

Cassell perhaps exaggerated the impact of the advertisement duty for political reasons. The growth of trade, and the reduction of the advertisement duty in 1833, had led to a substantial increase in press advertising in the 1830s and 1840s. Even before that, most commercial newspapers – but not the radical press – had been reliant on advertising. But it was only with the abolition of

the advertisement duty in 1853 that popular press advertising came fully into its own. Between 1854 and 1858, for instance, *Reynolds's Newspaper* increased its advertising volume by over 50 per cent.²⁶ This surge in advertising expenditure, combined with the repeal of the stamp and paper duties, transformed the economic structure of the popular press. The modal price of popular papers was halved in the 1850s and halved again in the 1860s. At the new prevailing price structure, nearly all newspapers – including those with very large circulations such as *Reynolds's Newspaper*²⁷ – depended on advertising for their profits since their reduced cover prices no longer met their costs. Advertisers thus acquired a *de facto* licensing power because, without their support, newspapers ceased to be economically viable.

Rising circulations and the sharp fall in the price of newsprint between 1875 and 1895 did not diminish the central role of advertising in the press. Newspaper costs rose, due to increased paging, more staff and the introduction of sale-or-return arrangements with distributors. The prices of most popular papers again halved, dropping to ½d in the late Victorian period. These changes were funded in part by a large increase of advertising, which rose to an estimated £20 million in 1907.²⁸

The political implications of newspapers' economic dependence on advertising have been ignored largely because it is assumed that advertisers bought space in newspapers on the basis of commercial rather than political criteria. But political considerations played a significant part in some advertisers' calculations during the Victorian period. In 1856 the principal advertising handbook detailed the political views of most London and local newspapers with the proud boast that 'till this Directory was published, the advertiser had no means of accurately determining which journal *might be best adapted to his views*, and most likely to forward his interests' (emphasis added).²⁹ Even non-socialist newspapers found that controversial editorial policies could lead to the loss of advertising. The *Pall Mall Gazette's* advertising revenue dropped sharply in 1885 when the editor 'procured' a 13-year-old girl as part of the paper's campaign to raise the legal age of consent to sex.³⁰ The *Daily News* was boycotted by some advertisers in 1886 when it campaigned for Home Rule.³¹ Government advertising long continued to be allocated on a partisan basis. As late as 1893 the incoming Home Secretary, Herbert Asquith, was told that generally 'it is the custom to transfer advertisements according to the politics of governments'.³²

Political prejudice in advertising selection almost certainly declined during the latter part of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, due to the rise of major national advertisers, the growth of advertising agencies and the greater availability of (still often unreliable) circulation statistics. But even when political partisanship played no part in advertising selection, left-wing publications still encountered discrimination on economic grounds. As a leading advertising guide counselled in 1856, 'some of the most widely circulated journals in the Empire are the worst possible to advertise in. Their

readers are not purchasers; and any money spent on them is so much thrown away'.³³ Newspapers read by the well-to-do were assessed differently. 'Character is of more importance than number', advised an advertising handbook in 1851, adding that 'a journal that circulates a thousand among the upper or middle classes is a better medium than would be one circulating a hundred thousand among the lower classes'.³⁴ Similar, though usually more qualified, advice continued to be given for some time. For example, Sir Charles Higham, the head of a large advertising agency, wrote in 1925, 'A very limited circulation, but entirely among the wealthy . . . may be more valuable than if the circulation were quadrupled'.³⁵

Some advertisers also made a key distinction between the skilled and poor working class. Indeed, the latter were often excluded from the early market research surveys in the 1920s on the grounds that they were not worth bothering about.³⁶ Once newspapers became identified with the poor, they found it difficult to attract advertising. As an advertising handbook cautioned in 1921, 'You cannot afford to place your advertisements in a paper which is read by the down-at-heels who buy it to see the "Situations Vacant" column'.³⁷

This combination of economic and political discrimination by advertisers influenced the development of left-wing journalism. In the first place, it exerted pressure on the radical press to move upmarket in order to survive. A number of radical newspapers redefined their target audience, and moderated their radicalism, in an attempt to attract the more affluent readers that advertisers wanted to reach.

This process is well illustrated by *Reynolds's Newspaper*. It was founded in 1850 by George Reynolds, a member of the left-wing faction of the Chartist National Executive. Reynolds had urged a 'physical force' strategy in 1848 and opposed middle-class collaboration in the early 1850s. His paper was initially in the *Northern Star* tradition of class-conscious radicalism, and had close links to the working-class movement. Yet despite its radical origins, the paper changed under the impact of the new economic imperatives of newspaper publishing. The fact that *Reynolds's Newspaper* never provided, even at the outset, a consistent theoretical perspective doubtless made it vulnerable to ideological incorporation. Inevitably it was influenced by the decline of radicalism in the country during the 1850s and early 1860s, but an important factor in its absorption was also the need to attract advertising revenue. The change was symbolized by its inclusion of regular features on friendly societies in the year after the repeal of the advertisement duty, as a ploy to attract advertising. Enterprises which had been attacked in militant newspapers as 'a hoax' to persuade working-class people to identify with capitalism became a much-needed source of revenue for the paper.

Reynolds's Newspaper continued to take a radical democratic stand on most major issues of the day, but it also increasingly expressed the individualistic values of the more affluent readers whom it needed to attract.³⁸ It portrayed self-help rather than state activism as the way forward, endorsing 'prudent

marriage' (i.e. sexual restraint) and emigration as the solutions to unemployment. Its radicalism increasingly took the form of stories about the vices of the aristocracy, corruption in high places, and the deficiencies of Anglican vicars. *Reynolds's Newspaper* became a paper that catered for the coalition of lower-middle-class and working-class readers necessary for its survival. Acquired by the Dicks family in 1879 and later by the Scottish Liberal MP James Dalziel, it gradually evolved into a conventional Liberal paper.

Reynolds was accused of commercial opportunism by contemporary critics (including Karl Marx); yet it is difficult to see what else he could have done if the paper was to survive the transition to an advertising-based system. Even the radical *People's Paper*, which Marx wrote for regularly between 1852 and 1856, boasted of its appeal to 'high paid trades and shopkeepers' in its promotion to advertisers.³⁹

Radical newspapers could survive in the new economic environment only if they successfully moved upmarket or if they remained in a small working-class ghetto, with manageable losses which could be offset by donations. Once they moved out of that ghetto and sought a larger working-class audience, they became vulnerable. They were liable to find that their sales revenue did not cover costs due to insufficient advertising. If they increased their sales, they merely incurred greater losses.

This fate befell the London *Evening Echo*, which was taken over by wealthy radicals in 1901 and relaunched as a socialist paper, committed to 'the interests of labour as against the tyranny of organised capital'. In the period 1902 to 1904 its circulation rose by a remarkable 60 per cent, leading to its abrupt closure in 1905. The *Evening Echo's* advertising had failed to keep pace with its growth of circulation, making its continuation impossible.⁴⁰

The same thing almost happened to the *Daily Herald* when it was relaunched as a daily in 1919. It spent £10,000 on promotion – a small amount by comparison with its main rivals – but sufficient to boost its sales. 'Owing to the heavy price of paper, our success in circulation', recalled George Lansbury, 'was our undoing. The more copies we sold, the more money we lost'.⁴¹ The situation became increasingly desperate when, aided by false accusations of being funded with Moscow gold, the paper's circulation continued to rise in 1920. 'Every copy we sold was sold at a loss', mourned Lansbury. 'The rise in circulation, following the government's attacks, brought us nearer and nearer to disaster'.⁴² The money raised from whist drives, dances, draws and collections was not enough to offset the shortfall of advertising. The desperate expedient of doubling the paper's price in 1920 was not enough to secure its future. Money from the miners and the railwaymen prevented the paper from closing. But the only way the paper could be saved, in the long term, was by its being taken over as the official organ of the Labour Party and Trades Union Congress (TUC) in 1922. A paper that had been a freewheeling vehicle of the left, an important channel for the dissemination of syndicalist and socialist ideas in the early part of the twentieth century,⁴³ became the official

mouthpiece of the moderate leadership of the labour movement. Lack of advertising forced it to become subservient to a new form of control.⁴⁴

In short, one of four things happened to national radical papers that failed to meet the requirements of advertisers. Either they closed down; accommodated to advertising pressure by moving upmarket; stayed in a small-audience ghetto with manageable losses; or accepted an alternative source of institutional patronage.

Yet publications which conformed to the marketing requirements of advertisers obtained what were, in effect, large external subsidies which they could spend on increased editorial outlay and promotion to attract additional readers. Rising advertising expenditure also provided a strong incentive for entrepreneurs to launch publications directed at markets that advertisers particularly wanted to reach. Between 1866 and 1896 the number of magazines increased from an estimated 557 to 2097, many of which were trade, technical and professional journals aimed at specialized groups attractive to advertisers. The number of local dailies grew from under ten in 1850 to 196 in 1900, falling to 169 by 1920 (due mainly to the casualties caused by intense competition). There was also a substantial expansion in the number of local weekly papers from fewer than 400 in 1856 to 2072 in 1900, declining to 1700 by 1921. Above all, there was a substantial increase in the number of national daily and Sunday papers, mostly founded between 1880 and 1918.⁴⁵

The growth in the number of publications was accompanied by an enormous increase in newspaper circulation. This was facilitated by rising incomes, improved reading skills (though mass basic literacy predated Foster's 1870 Education Act due to the impact of church schools) and reduced working hours. By 1920, total daily circulation had reached 14.67 million, while total Sunday circulation had soared to 20.32 million.⁴⁶

In brief, the left press suffered a double defeat. It lost its leading position in popular journalism, and largely missed out on the major expansion of the press that took place between 1855 and 1920.

Impact of the industrialized press

At the turn of the nineteenth century, some traditional educationalists taught working-class children to read but not to write – as a way of containing the threat posed by literacy to the social order.⁴⁷ These children were to read what was good for them; not to write anything that might prove harmful. Something like this division of labour was achieved through the industrialization of the press. Workers became the consumers of newspapers; they no longer controlled its production.

Many of the new local dailies, founded after 1855, were started or bought by leading local industrialists. Both the *Northern Daily Express* and the *Northern Leader* were bought by colliery owners; the *South Shields Gazette* was acquired by Stevenson, a member of a local chemical manufacturing family; the *Bolton*

Evening News belonged to local industrialists, the Tillotsons; the *Yorkshire Post*'s principal shareholder was the Leeds banker Beckett-Denison; the *Ipswich Express* was owned by Colman, the mustard manufacturer, and so on.⁴⁸ These papers mostly offered a very different view of the world from that of the early radical press which they largely supplanted. Papers such as the *Northern Star* had amplified class conflicts in the local community ('to talk of reconciliation between the middle and working classes in Leicester will, henceforth, be a farce' was a typical lead-in to one of its news reports).⁴⁹ In contrast, the new local commercial press tended to block out conflict, minimise differences, and encourage positive identification with the local community and its middle-class leadership. Characteristic of this style of consensual journalism was a report in the *Leeds Mercury* (printed in the same city as the *Northern Star*) of a local dignitary addressing the annual public soirée of the Leeds Mechanics Institute on the subject of 'these popular institutions, sustained by the united efforts of all classes . . . thereby to promote the virtue, happiness and peace of the community'.⁵⁰

The early militant press had fuelled suspicion of middle-class reformists with a barrage of criticism against 'sham-radical humbugs' and 'the merciful middle-class converts to half Chartism at half past the eleventh hour'.⁵¹ In contrast, the industrialized press encouraged its readers to support the political establishment represented by the Conservative and Liberal parties. Indeed, the rise of the cheap press played an important part in the transformation of what had been in 1850 little more than aristocratic factions in parliament into political parties with a mass base. Between 1851 and 1887, the number of newspapers affiliated to the Conservative and Liberal parties increased from 189 to 707 (with most of the increase taking place in the 1860s).⁵² And between 1857 and 1892, the number of newspaper proprietors elected to the House of Commons rose from four to thirty.⁵³ This marriage of journalism and party politics helped to integrate growing numbers of people into the political system, even though the majority did not gain the vote until 1918.

The new Liberal press, in particular, played a significant role in re-routing radical politics. Leading liberal papers, like the initially centre-left *Daily Telegraph* founded in 1855, adapted radical themes in ways that fundamentally changed their meaning. Thus, an earlier stress on co-operation based on common ownership was reincarnated as the partnership between employers and employees that would bring prosperity to all. A commitment to social reconstruction became transmuted into improvement through middle-class enlightenment. A view of education as a means of class resistance gave way to one that emphasized individual advancement. Admittedly these transformations drew upon a radical tradition that had contained contradictions within it. But by giving prominence to its liberal features, the industrial press diluted the radical inheritance of the Chartist era.

This is not to make light of the differences between liberal-radical newspapers and their rivals in the post-1855 period, not least in their reporting of trade

unions, the emergent women's movement, Irish Home Rule, and state reform activism. But notwithstanding these important differences, all national newspapers launched between 1855 and 1910, and the overwhelming majority of new local daily papers, encouraged positive identification with the social system in contrast to their radical predecessors. This shift is perhaps best illustrated by the way in which Queen Victoria was portrayed. The radical press in the period 1837 to 1855 was aggressively republican: the Queen was vilified as being politically reactionary, the head of a system of organised corruption, the mother of a brood of royal cadgers, and the friend and relative of European tyrants. In contrast, the new press portrayed the Queen from the mid-1870s onward as a dutiful and benign matriarch who symbolized in an almost talismanic way the moral and material progress of her reign.⁵⁴ Projecting her as the living embodiment of national unity, the press also played a key role in transforming the royal jubilee celebrations of 1887 and 1897 into popular, mobilizing rites of national communion.⁵⁵

Above all, the new popular press fostered the wave of imperialism that swept through all levels of society. Popular newspapers tended to portray Britain's colonial role as a civilizing mission to the heathen, underdeveloped world, or as an extended adventure story in which military triumphs were achieved through individual acts of courage rather than through superior military technology. Common to both themes was pride in Britain's ascendancy: as the *Daily Mail*, the most popular daily of late Victorian Britain, enthused:

We send out a boy here and a boy there, and the boy takes hold of the savages of the part he comes to and teaches them to march and shoot as he tells them, to obey him and believe in him and die for him and the Queen. A plain, stupid, uninspired people they call us, and yet we are doing this with every kind of savage man there is.⁵⁶

This celebration of Britain's dominion sometimes struck a more atavistic note, as in this report of the 1898 Sudan expedition in the *Westminster Gazette*:

A large number of the Tommies had never been under fire before . . . and there was a curious look of suppressed excitement in some of the faces . . . Now and then I caught in a man's eye the curious gleam which, despite all the veneer of civilization, still holds its own in man's nature, whether he is killing rats with a terrier, rejoicing in a prize fight, playing a salmon or potting Dervishes. It was a fine day and we were out to kill something. Call it what you like, the experience is a big factor in the joy of living.⁵⁷

The paper which celebrated 'potting Dervishes' was 'progressive' in terms of the narrow political arc represented by the contemporary London press. It was, for example, one of the few papers not to be in favour of the Boer War.

However, it subsequently joined other papers (with the notable exception of the *Daily Herald*) in providing Hun-hating support for Britain's involvement in the First World War.

The First World War had been preceded by regular press depictions of British military action as being necessary and desirable.⁵⁸ In part this stemmed from an imperialist mind-set in which colonial conflicts were likened to policing operations; in part from fashionable Social Darwinist thought which viewed war as a legitimate form of arbitration between competing nations; and, especially in the popular imperialist press, from what amounted almost to a cult of war.⁵⁹ This viewed military conflict as a purifying, redemptive process in which the ill-effects of over-civilization and racial degeneration could be exorcized. It was also bound up with a particular view of masculinity, in which war was viewed as something that men did. How men responded to war was a true test of their manhood: whether they reacted with the fear of a coward or, in the words of the *Daily Mail*, with the excitement of a young man 'responding to the blast [of the trumpet] as for his wedding bell'.⁶⁰

This cult of war was especially evident in press responses to the Boer War (1899–1902) where the British experienced military reverses. The war was hailed by *Lloyd's Newspaper* as a cleansing purgative, restoring the nation to health after a period when the 'great heart' of empire had suffered 'from fatty degeneration'.⁶¹ According to the *News of the World*, it had awakened Britain from its lethargy, rendering the country 'stronger and more fitted for the duties of Empire'.⁶² In the *Daily Mirror's* view, it revealed 'the elasticity of a great people'.⁶³ But the most eloquent tribute came in a *Daily Mail* editorial chillingly headed 'The Blessings of War'. The benefit of war, according to the paper, was that it provided an opportunity 'to re-examine the bases of our national life, ruthlessly digging away all that is decayed or doubtful' and at the same time enabled the Empire to emerge 'stronger, more fully prepared, amply equipped against the worst our foes can do to us'.⁶⁴

The militarism of the British press helps to explain why, at the outbreak of the Great War, so many young men volunteered for the armed forces with excitement and enthusiasm, often egged on by the civilian population. The killing fields of the western front, and elsewhere, were to claim the lives of almost a million British soldiers. It was the bitter harvest of a press which had heedlessly preached for years the virtues of patriotism and valour in defending Britain's empire.⁶⁵

Conclusion

The radical press was defeated decisively after the abolition of the 'taxes on knowledge'. Its defeat cannot be attributed solely to the changed climate of opinion, following the collapse of the Chartist Movement. This *Zeitgeist* or 'sovereign consumer' interpretation, though often invoked, fails to explain why the press, taken as a whole, moved further to the right than public opinion;

nor does it explain why the subsequent revival of the radical movement did not give rise to a stronger revival of radical journalism. The eclipse of the radical press as the dominant force in national popular journalism was also due to structural changes in the press industry. The industrialization of the press, with its accompanying rise in publishing costs, led to a progressive transfer of ownership and control of the popular press to wealthy businesspeople, while dependence on advertising encouraged the absorption or elimination of the early radical press and stunted its subsequent development before the First World War.

Notes

- 1 E. Miller, 'Literature and the late-Victorian radical press', *Literature Compass*, 7 (8), 2010, pp. 702–12; M. Tusan, *Women Making News* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2005); D. Hopkin, 'The left-wing press and the new journalism' in J. Wiener (ed.) *Papers for the Millions: The New Journalism in Britain* (Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1988); and D. Hopkin, 'The socialist press in Britain, 1890–1910' in G. Boyce, J. Curran and P. Wingate (eds.) *Newspaper History* (London, Constable, 1978).
- 2 For example, L. Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 276; S. Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* (London, Hamish Hamilton, vol. 1, 1981), p. 414.
- 3 Despite three extensions of the franchise, only 60 per cent of adult men possessed the vote, while all women were disenfranchised, in 1914. See D. Cannadine, *The Undivided Past* (London, Allen Lane, 2013), p. 72.
- 4 H. Cunningham, *Time, Work and Leisure* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2014) summarises the latest evidence on increased leisure in Victorian Britain.
- 5 This is a key point documented in R. Holton, 'Daily Herald v. Daily Citizen 1912–15', *International Review of Social History*, 19 (3), 1974, pp. 347–76.
- 6 For the relative weakness of the radical press in c. 1910, see A. Lee's 'The radical press' in A. Morris (ed.) *Edwardian Radicalism, 1900–1914* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).
- 7 D. Butler and G. Butler, *Twentieth-Century British Political Facts 1900–2000*, 8th edition (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2000), p. 22. The *Daily Herald* did not resume daily production until 1919.
- 8 Brown, *Victorian News*, p. 276.
- 9 V. Berridge, 'Popular Sunday papers and mid-Victorian society' in G. Boyce, J. Curran and P. Wingate (eds.) *Newspaper History* (London, Constable, 1978), p. 264. This interpretation has been extended in divergent ways by J. Chalaby, *The Invention of Journalism* (London, Macmillan, 1998) and M. Conboy, *The Press and Popular Culture* (London, Sage, 2002).
- 10 *News of the World*, 1 October 1843.
- 11 B. Capp, *Astrology and the Popular Press* (London, Faber and Faber, 1979); L. Shepherd, *The History of Street Literature* (Newton Abbot, David and Charles, 1973).
- 12 R. Pound and G. Harmsworth, *Northcliffe* (London, Cassell, 1959), p. 206.
- 13 A. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press 1854–1914* (London, Croom Helm, 1976), p. 149.
- 14 Lee, *Origins*, p. 150.

- 15 H. Herd, *The March of Journalism* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1952), p. 185.
- 16 Lee, *Origins*, p. 167.
- 17 C. Seymour-Ure, 'The press and party system between the wars' in G. Peele and C. Cook (eds.) *The Politics of Reappraisal 1918–39* (London, Macmillan, 1975), p. 242.
- 18 See Chapter 2, note 23.
- 19 A. J. P. Taylor, *Beaverbrook* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1972), p. 175.
- 20 S. Coltham, 'The *Bee-Hive* newspaper: its origins and early development' in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds.) *Essays in Labour History* (London, Macmillan, 1960).
- 21 See in particular Hopkin, 'Socialist press'.
- 22 Holton, *Daily Herald*, 1974.
- 23 G. Lansbury, *The Miracle of Fleet Street* (London, Victoria House, 1925).
- 24 Market entry costs were especially high in Britain due to the early emergence of a strong national press. They were lower in European countries with a dominant local press, such as Germany and Sweden, where it was easier for radical journalism to flourish.
- 25 Report of the Select Committee on Newspaper Stamps, *Parliamentary Papers*, 17, 1851, p. 236.
- 26 Berridge, 'Popular Sunday papers', Table 13.1, p. 250.
- 27 V. Berridge, 'Popular journalism and working class attitudes, 1854–86: A study of *Reynolds's Newspaper*, *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* and the *Weekly Times*', Unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of London, 1976).
- 28 R. Critchley, *UK Advertising Statistics* (London, Advertising Association, 1974).
- 29 *Mitchell's Newspaper Press Directory*, 5th edition (London, Mitchell, 1856), p. 7.
- 30 L. Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1985), p. 23.
- 31 Brown, *Victorian News*, p. 23.
- 32 Brown, *Victorian News*, p. 57. This had also been true of the 1880s; see A. Aspinall, *Politics and the Press* (Brighton, Harvester, 1973 [1949]), p. 382.
- 33 C. Mitchell, *The Newspaper Press Directory and Advertisers' Guide* (London, Mitchell and Co, 1856), p. 15.
- 34 Anon, *Guide to Advertisers*, (London, 1851).
- 35 C. Higham, *Advertising* (London, Williams and Norgate, 1925), p. 166.
- 36 For example, the national survey on which *Press Circulations Analysed* (London, London Research Bureau, 1928) is based.
- 37 C. Freer, *The Inner Side of Advertising: A Practical Handbook for Advertisers* (London, Library Press, 1921), p. 203.
- 38 For a fuller analysis of the paper's editorial change, see Berridge, 'Popular journalism', 1976 and Berridge, 'Popular Sunday newspapers', 1978.
- 39 Advertisement placed in *Mitchell's Newspaper Directory 1857–8* (London, Mitchell, 1858).
- 40 F. Pethick-Lawrence, *Fate Has Been Kind* (London, Hutchinson, 1943), pp. 65 ff.
- 41 G. Lansbury, *The Miracle of Fleet Street* (Victoria House, London), p. 160.
- 42 Lansbury, *Miracle*, p. 161.
- 43 B. Holton, *British Syndicalism 1900–1914* (London, Pluto, 1976).
- 44 This is very well described in H. Richards, *The Bloody Circus: The Daily Herald and the Left* (London, Pluto, 1997).
- 45 Estimates derived from *Mitchell's Newspaper Press Directory* (London, Mitchell, 1850–1920).

- 46 N. Kaldor and R. Silverman, *A Statistical Analysis of Advertising Expenditure and of the Revenue of the Press* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1948), Table 45, p. 84.
- 47 B. Simon, *The Two Nations and the Educational Structure, 1780–1870* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1974), p. 133.
- 48 Lee, *Origins*, pp. 135 ff.
- 49 *Northern Star*, 7 May 1842.
- 50 *Leeds Mercury*, 14 June 1851.
- 51 *Northern Star*, 26 February 1842; cf. *Northern Star*, 11 June 1842.
- 52 Lee, *Origins*, Table 28, p. 290.
- 53 Lee, *Origins*, Table 34, p. 296.
- 54 J. Plunkett, *Queen Victoria: First Media Monarch* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003); F. Prochaska, *Royal Bounty* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995). However, *Reynold's Newspaper* long remained a republican paper.
- 55 E. Hammond and D. Cannandine, 'Conflict and consensus on a ceremonial occasion: the diamond jubilee in Cambridge in 1887', *Historical Journal*, 24 (1), 1981, pp. 111–46.
- 56 *Daily Mail*, 23 June 1897.
- 57 Cited in P. Knightley, *The First Casualty* (London, Deutsch, 1975), p. 41.
- 58 G. Wilkinson, "'The blessings of war": the depiction of military force in Edwardian newspapers', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 33 (1), 1990, 97–115.
- 59 Press portrayals were part of a contemporary, literary cult of war, examined in P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975).
- 60 *Daily Mail*, 12 October 1912.
- 61 *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 28 January 1900.
- 62 *News of the World*, 1 June 1902.
- 63 *Daily Mirror*, 5 April 1904.
- 64 *Daily Mail*, 1 January 1900 cited in Wilkinson, 'Blessings'.
- 65 Remorse is movingly expressed by Rudyard Kipling (whose son was killed in the war) in the poem 'Epitaphs of the War 1914–1918'. Available at: www.kipling-society.co.uk/poems_epitaphs.htm (accessed 8 February 2016). This reaction, shared by others of his generation, helps to explain the very different response of the inter-war press to the threat of war, described in the next chapter.

Era of the press barons

The era of the press barons is often seen as a maverick interlude in the development of the press. According to this view, press barons gained an unprecedented hegemony over the press, and cynically manipulated their newspapers as engines of propaganda. The despotic rule of the press barons is contrasted with a preceding golden age when proprietors played an inactive role, and editors were 'sovereign'.¹ The press barons have thus become favourite bogey-men: censoring them has become a way of celebrating the former editorial integrity of the press.

But in reality the reign of the press barons did not constitute an exceptional pathology in the evolution of the press, but merely a continuation of tendencies already present before. Indeed, insofar as the barons may be said to have been innovators, it is not for the reasons that are generally given.

Creation of press empires

The large press groups built by the press barons did not represent a decisive break with the past. Newspaper chains had developed as early as the 1820s;² and continued to grow thereafter. Thus, the steel magnate, Andrew Carnegie owned eight British dailies and about ten weeklies in 1884.³

While the press barons were the beneficiaries of rising circulation, this was hardly new. Newspaper sales had been rising ever since 1695, and this growth greatly accelerated after 1855. Likewise, the leading position acquired by some titles owned by the press barons was not a novel phenomenon. Unequal competition between strong and weak papers had given rise repeatedly to market dominance. For example, *The Times* was especially dominant in the 1850s national daily press.⁴

In brief, the press empires created by the press barons merely continued three well-established trends – chain ownership, rising newspaper consumption and market ascendancy. All that happened was that, in some cases, these trends became more pronounced.

Thus, newspaper chains got bigger in terms of the percentage of titles they controlled. Between 1921 and 1939, the big five regional chains' share of local morning titles increased from 12 per cent to 44 per cent, while their

share of local evening titles (excluding London) rose from 8 per cent to 40 per cent.⁵ This was largely a consequence of newspaper acquisitions at a time of contraction in the number of titles.⁶ This was organised partly through a series of cynical carve-ups in which press magnates – most notably, Lords Camrose, Kemsley and Rothermere – sold out in some areas and consolidated in others on the basis of tacit or explicit cartel deals with each other.⁷ This facilitated the creation of local oligopolies where most local papers in the sub-region were owned by the same publisher, and contributed to a rise in the number of towns with no choice of local paper.⁸ However, the rapid advance of the chains in the regional press took place mainly in the 1920s, and stalled in the 1930s.⁹

The press groups owned by the barons also benefited from an enormous increase in national daily newspaper reading between the wars. The Sunday press had already built a mass following in Victorian and Edwardian Britain, and consequently its gains – from 13.5 to 15.8 million between 1920 and 1939 – were relatively modest.¹⁰ By contrast, national daily circulation almost doubled from 5.4 million to 10.6 million.¹¹ In 1932 national dailies outsold local dailies for the first time.¹²

A small number of national titles built mass circulations. Lord Northcliffe's *Daily Mail* was the first British daily to reach 1 million in 1915;¹³ the *Daily Herald* was the first to notch up 2 million in 1933;¹⁴ and the *Daily Express* was the first to break the 2.5 million barrier in 1939.¹⁵ The prominence of Beaverbrook as a press baron was mainly due to the success of two titles: the *Daily* and *Sunday Express*.

But while the inter-war press barons commanded larger sales than before, they were in relative terms no more dominant in the national press than earlier in the century. Indeed, in 1937, the three leading national daily magnates (Beaverbrook, Rothermere and Southgate) controlled 58 per cent of national daily circulation,¹⁶ significantly less than the estimated 67 per cent controlled by their counterparts (Pearson, Cadbury and Northcliffe) in 1910.¹⁷ The market share of the three leading Sunday newspaper magnates (Beaverbrook, Carr and Kemsley) in 1937 was 55 per cent, again less than the 69 per cent share of their lesser known equivalents (Dalziel, Riddell and Lloyd) in 1910.¹⁸

Thus, the barons' hegemony over the national press waned during the inter-war period when their ascendancy became notorious. This reverse was partly due to the belated revival of a Labour movement press which was made possible, as we shall see, by changes in the market system. In addition one of the most powerful press barons, Lord Rothermere, overreached himself and was forced to sell major press assets during the Depression.

Press barons and proprietorial control

The two archetypal press barons, Northcliffe and Beaverbrook, had very different personal styles. While Northcliffe was notorious for personally haranguing

his staff, Beaverbrook's remoteness was legendary. In *Scoop*, Evelyn Waugh satirized a visit to him:

The carpets were thicker [as one approached Lord Copper's private office], the lights softer, the expressions of the inhabitants more careworn. The typewriters were of a special kind: their keys made no more sound than the drumming of a bishop's finger-tips on an upholstered prie-dieu. The telephone buzzers were muffled and purred like warm cats. The personal private secretaries padded through the ante-chambers and led them nearer and nearer to the presence.¹⁹

Yet despite their differences of personality, both men made sure that their wishes were followed. Beaverbrook sent 147 separate instructions to the *Daily Express* in one day. Northcliffe would ring up his staff as early as six in the morning, saying abruptly 'Wake up! Have you seen the papers yet?' When one weary editor explained that you could not get the papers so early where he lived, he was woken up at 5 AM the next day by papers being delivered to his home by a noisy pantechnicon.²⁰ Both proprietors generated terror as part of their managerial style, something that inspired anecdotes that were perhaps improved in the telling. 'Who is that?', Northcliffe said on the phone. 'Editor, Weekly Dispatch, Chief', came the reply. 'Ex-editor', responded Northcliffe, putting down the phone.²¹ When a luckless sub-editor filled a lull in a meal-time conversation with the observation that he had been shipwrecked three times, Northcliffe said abruptly 'four times', and sacked him.²² Beaverbrook also had a fearsome reputation for firing journalists.²³

The barons combined terror with generosity. Their official histories and journalists' memoirs recount the sudden gifts, holidays and salary rises which were showered on staff. As a genre these stories could be called 'courageous underling gets his reward'. They usually take the form of the plucky journalist standing up for himself (or, more rarely, for what he believes) in the face of the baron's fury. They are clearly intended to enhance both the baron, who is revealed as discriminating and fundamentally right-minded in his judgments, and the journalist whose independence is demonstrated by his courage. But what they actually reveal is an almost continuous process of humiliation. Bernard Falk, usually rewarded with a cigar when he took down Northcliffe's dictated social column for the *Mail*, was once allowed to choose the one he wanted. 'What!' said Northcliffe, 'You have the nerve to pick on those cigars! Don't you know, young man, that they cost 3/6 each?' 'Yes', said the fearless reporter, 'but they're worth every penny'.²⁴ Another editor, who dared to disagree with Northcliffe, recorded gratefully the telegram he received: 'My dear Blackwood, you are grossly impertinent to your affectionate Chief'.²⁵

Losing a battle with a press baron hardly made such a good story. George Buckle, the editor of *The Times* (whose editorial independence Northcliffe had promised to uphold), was eased out of the editorship when he failed to adapt