

The Americanization of the British Press, 1830s-1914: Speed in the Age of Transatlantic Journalism

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This impressive book brings together two strands of media history to create a new narrative, attempting to explain how and why newspaper journalism in Britain and the United States was transformed between the 1830s and the first decades of the 20th century, establishing the popular style of journalism we know today. It is the culmination of many years' scholarship by the author, a Professor Emeritus of History at the City University of New York, whose sizeable contribution to 19th-century newspaper history includes two pertinent essays on the 'new journalism' or 'yellow journalism', as this phenomenon is known in Britain and the United States respectively. The two essays are a 1988 chapter, 'How new was the new journalism?' and his 1994 development of one strand of that chapter, 'The Americanization of the British press, 1830–1914'. [\(1\)](#) Here he has fleshed out the latter article into book form, although the broader framework of the earlier piece would have made a better monograph.

In that 1988 essay, Professor Wiener argued that British journalistic genres from publishing 'platforms' such as the radical unstamped press, the disreputable Sunday newspaper, provincial papers and magazines were slowly adopted by London daily newspapers – alongside American innovations such as the interview and investigative journalism – to create the 'new journalism' of the late 1880s onwards. London morning papers were the last type of newspaper to combine these tropes into a formula that has defined popular journalism ever since. This fruitful and persuasive thesis has generated much useful subsequent work, such as Graham Law's study of the new journalism element of serial fiction in newspapers [\(2\)](#), revealing structures and relationships that bound together periodicals, the provincial and metropolitan press and Scottish, English and

American publications. Rather than pursuing this line, Professor Wiener has written a book with a much narrower and more contentious argument: that a more democratic American society produced a more demotic writing style, focusing on 'human interest' stories such as crime rather than high politics, inventing the newspaper interview, deifying speed in reporting and publishing, and presenting this news in a more visually attractive way, with illustrations and bold headlines. This more populist style reached mainstream newspaper journalism much earlier in the US than in Britain. For,

While popular journalism in Britain pioneered the retailing of gossip and the use of pictures, most of the key transformations in journalism occurred a little earlier and had a greater impact in America (p. 4).

As the book is likely to have more significance for British journalism historiography, this review concentrates on that aspect.

To summarise, the first of two short introductory chapters sets out the purpose and scope of the book, briefly acknowledging theoretical approaches whilst stating that the aim is instead to present a long view of changes in 19th-century journalism that incorporates the complex, evolutionary nature of change, propelled by a cast of bit players as well as great men such as James Gordon Bennett, Randolph Hearst, W. T. Stead and Alfred Harmsworth. Next, chapter one surveys the British fear of an 'Americanized' press, contrasted with the 'higher journalism' of the monthly and weekly review periodicals and the leader columns of the more serious daily papers. Most of the writers quoted are either higher journalists or authors, a literary elite who felt threatened by America's cultural democracy, and whose attacks became shriller as a distinctive American literary culture developed towards the end of the century.

Subsequent chapters, despite their apparently thematic titles, follow a chronological structure. Chapter two traces some American developments of the 1830s back to British popular oral and print culture, whilst others are distinctively American, such as James Gordon Bennett's investigative journalism on his *New York Herald*, and his delayed release of information about shocking crimes to create an extended, suspenseful and melodramatic news narrative. Chapter three explores the 'democratization of news', first in the US, where newspapers were integral to a burgeoning democratic society, and later in Britain, where a culturally rather than politically more democratic society was enabled by the repeal of the newspaper taxes at mid-century. Developments included faster printing and faster reporting, the growth of news reporting (as opposed to opinion) as a journalistic activity, the telegraph and news agencies, and illustrated journalism – all except the last originating in America. The appearance of innovative publications such as the *Illustrated Times* and the better known *Illustrated London News* is successfully integrated with broader narratives.

The strongest chapter, 'The stimulus of war', argues convincingly that the American Civil War (1861–5) was 'a decisive turning point in the history of journalism' (p. 80). It created a huge demand for news, led to changes in the physical size, visual appeal and writing style of US newspapers, established war reporting as a staple ingredient of journalism and emphasised speed, largely thanks to the telegraph (p. 85). Similar changes occurred in British journalism during the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1). Chapter five, 'Expansion of the press', examines the implications of the huge growth in newspaper titles and circulations in the third quarter of the century in both countries, in regional centres as well as the two metropolises. Developments in advertising and distribution are dealt with, alongside the growth of investigative journalism in America and the separate tradition of social exploration by British journalists such as Henry Mayhew and James Greenwood.

Chapter six, 'Gossip and other matters', argues that American journalistic tropes such as gossip and the interview were transmitted by individual journalists moving between the two countries or working for each other's papers. Chapters seven and eight compare and contrast two journalists apiece to follow developments in the 1880s (Joseph Pulitzer and W. T. Stead) and the 1890s (William Randolph Hearst and Alfred Harmsworth). The former are seen as similar in their use of sensationalism in the service of high ideals, while the latter epitomised 'Anglo-American popular journalism [in the] form that was to characterise it for much of the succeeding hundred years' (p. 183). Although Hearst and Harmsworth both had democratic instincts, they invested more capital, applied more industrial methods and acquired more titles than ever

before, borrowing magazine formats and using sensation chiefly for commercial ends.

The final chapter takes stock of newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic in the years before 1914, finding that British popular dailies were now Americanized in their processes and contents. They had fewer, smaller leading articles, less Parliamentary news, more features, and their news was more sensational, and gathered using intrusive, competitive, proactive 'American' techniques. Occupational debates within journalism over class differentials, professionalization and training are discussed, before a half-page conclusion.

Professor Wiener is an expert on British press history, having edited two influential collections on the unstamped press and the new journalism, among many other works.⁽³⁾ Here he attempts a synthesis of two national historiographies that have been kept apart for too long, spanning eight decades – an unusually long period in recent British media historiography, a field which still struggles to provide a coherent account of what happened to newspaper journalism across the 19th century as a whole. For this synthesis and periodization, Professor Wiener should be applauded.

His comparative approach ensures that the sum is greater than the parts, casting new light on familiar stories, and future studies of a cultural practice as inter-textual as journalism would do well to pursue this approach. Comparisons also reveal the contingency of journalistic developments on each side of the Atlantic, for example the use of the telegraph. In America, newspapers only began to fully exploit its potential two decades after its invention, thanks to wartime demand for news in the early 1860s; in Britain, changed market conditions after the telegraph companies were nationalised in 1870 (not 1868 [p. 97]) enabled commercial arrangements favourable to the largest newspaper market, the provincial press, only months before another war stimulated widespread use. So much for technological determinism.

Professor Wiener focuses on the titles published in two newspaper cities, New York and London, presumably to make his project manageable. He acknowledges that American journalism had many centres, with different histories, but chooses New York as the 'epicenter' of journalistic change throughout the 19th century, and the magnet drawing journalistic talent from across the nation. The choice of London is less problematic, he believes, because a 'London-centered "national press" existed from the outset of the nineteenth century' (p. 7), 'key elements of mass circulation journalism' came from London, and because, like New York, it drew the brightest and best to a 'forcing ground for journalistic creativity' (p. 5). These parameters are problematic: while London was the centre of British journalism, the majority of the nation's newspapers – which were weeklies rather than dailies – were published elsewhere for most of Professor Wiener's period, and there was no 'national' press, as we understand the term today, until the 20th century.⁽⁴⁾ This focus on an unrepresentative minority of the press – metropolitan dailies – immediately limits the significance of Professor Wiener's conclusions. To foreground London dailies in a history of new journalism is rather like choosing Saudi Arabia for an international study of women's suffrage; interesting, but not where the action is. Most American newspapers were undoubtedly more dynamic, innovative and interesting to read than London dailies, but to choose these publications as the British comparators is to misrepresent this country's Victorian press, whose magazines and weekly newspapers, in London and throughout the British Isles, responded to a growing readership of women, children and working-class men in many exciting ways.

The book's unrepresentative scope is related to its unrepresentative sources. Professor Wiener brings order to a wide array of secondary literature (books rather than journal articles), but his primary sources are chiefly memoirs and biographies of well known journalists and contemporary comment from elite metropolitan periodicals, with occasional reference to the newspapers themselves. Lucy Brown described journalists' memoirs as 'usually of very poor quality, rambling, and anecdotal', inaccurate and vague⁽⁵⁾, but Professor Wiener is less sceptical. Such memoirs tend to follow a rags-to-riches plotline, in which any mention of reporting rather than editing, or provincial rather than metropolitan experience, is confined to the early chapters and used as a narrative device to emphasise the heady heights of the writer's later career. This biographical material shares another problem with the periodical comment (selected mainly from critics of the new journalism) in that both sources emphasise change at the expense of continuity, making invisible the many aspects of journalism that continued as before. Here, more use of the trade press would have helped.

More surprising, in the era of digitised newspapers, is the lack of content analysis to support the quantitative claims of a study arguing for change and causation in specific types of editorial material, many of these trends easily tracked by word-searching. Instead, this is a journalists' history of journalism, from the viewpoint of the industry's great men. Indeed, the choice of illustrations – eight portraits – confirms the largely biographical approach. A book partly about how newspapers changed their appearance would have benefited from examples of typography, layout and newspaper illustration.

The lack of content analysis occasionally leads Professor Wiener to make unsupported assertions or factual errors. For instance, he argues that 'serious' news was being *replaced* by 'feather-brained' features or sensational reporting at the turn of the century (p. 219); my own content analysis of a handful of British newspapers in the second half of the 19th century confirms Mark Hampton's more nuanced view (6), that old and new types of journalism ran in parallel. The huge increase in the number of titles, physical size and pagination of newspapers meant that there was more of everything, whether measured in column inches or percentages (methods which often produce different results). Provincial publishers segmented their local markets, offering new journalism in halfpenny evening papers, in the weekly miscellany newspaper/magazines so ably studied by Law or in separate supplements, alongside the 'old journalism' of morning titles and traditional weekly papers.

Professor Wiener says that advertising in British newspapers 'took off' after 1853, when it was no longer taxed, but was 'less of a fixture of journalism than in the United States' (p. 107) – in fact, it had already taken off in Britain. In 1850, adverts made up around 50 per cent of *The Times* and some profitable county weeklies, well above the 25 per cent mark quoted for American papers, and increased until the 1870s. Further, British papers may have had fewer disreputable personal ads, but commercial announcements for abortifacients such as penny royal (guaranteed to clear 'female obstructions') and cures for sexually transmitted diseases, premature ejaculation ('Manhood: the causes of its premature decline') and the effects of 'solitary habits' were commonplace.

Content analysis also contradicts the assertion that, before the 1830s, papers in both countries ignored local news (pp. 34–5, 63–4). In fact, London dailies and provincial weeklies alike published plenty – metropolitan papers such as *The Times*, *Standard* and *Morning Chronicle* carried reports of London's district courts and vestry meetings, while non-metropolitan papers saw their prime duty as publishing a much broader array of local news, including courts, local government, sport, market prices, shipping news, births, marriages and deaths and columns of 'human interest' news headed 'Offences, Accidents &c'. The lack of provincial news in London papers was not a sign of lack of interest (p. 67), but a sign that *The Times* and other London dailies functioned as local/regional papers, circulating largely in south-east England.

The decision to exclude the provincial majority of newspapers from his account leads Professor Wiener into other errors. A few examples will suffice. The *London Evening News* only ranks as one of the first papers to publish a Saturday football special (p. 202) if the dozen or so provincial ones launched from the early 1880s onwards are discounted. Professor Wiener correctly identifies an important strand of British gossip journalism in 'London letters', Parliamentary sketch-writing and Parliamentary lobby reporting (pp. 141–6) but dates these developments too late: provincial newspapers published 'postscripts' and 'London letters' from the late 18th century onwards, long before this genre appeared in the London daily press; the lobby system for sourcing political gossip was also a provincial press innovation. At mid-century, especially after 1855, the huge expansion of provincial newspaper publishing does not support the claim that American 'regional newspapers flourished to a degree unimaginable in Britain' (p. 57), while evidence of newspaper-reading from public reading rooms and newsagents clashes with Professor Wiener's belief that 'London newspapers maintained a large circulation lead among provincial readers' in the third quarter of the century (p. 107). Professor Wiener suggests that reporters in Britain were mere shorthand stenographers until the third quarter of the century, when they adopted the mid-century American practice of actively seeking news. Yet the 'paragraphist', and the activity of 'paragraphing' or seeking out gossip and anecdote – 'human interest' stories -- was established in Britain from the 1820s at least, among freelance penny-a-liners and provincial district correspondents and staff reporters.

The book's stated lack of engagement with theory (p. 5) means that it is stronger on the who, what, where and when than the why or the how; there is little attempt to explain why particular developments happened when they did and where they did. Speed, highlighted in the book's subtitle, is presented as a motif rather than a theory, but is never conceptualised. What was the significance of speed, beyond competitive advantage when more than one title operated in any one market? Increasing speed is often a theme in retired journalists' memoirs, both because printing and reporting genuinely became faster, but also because the feeling that the world is moving faster is a common part of the ageing process. Publishers and journalists like to boast about speed, but how important was it to readers? Other terms would benefit from definition and examination, such as 'cultural democracy', 'reporting' or the 'human interest' genre of journalism.

Professor Wiener justifiably identifies the turn-of-the-century *Daily Mail* as the epitome of new journalism in its combination of 'an Americanized emphasis on news' and magazine features (p. 202). Indeed, the 'magazinization' (7) of the British press might be a more fruitful motif than speed, capturing the migration of many journalistic genres from magazines to papers. Some of these, such as illustrations and others not discussed here such as serial fiction and reader competitions, were either unrelated or actually opposed to speed. Magazinization could also be read as feminisation, surely an undertone in Matthew Arnold's description of the new journalism as 'feather-brained'.

Finally, a book about the transmission of cultural practices from one place to another requires discussion of the mechanisms of such transmission. Professor Wiener's biographical approach provides convincing evidence for one transmission route, showing how personnel moved back and forth across the Atlantic (pp. 129–36), but the movement of journalists within the British Isles was also significant; Stead, for example, began his working life (as an editor, never a reporter [p. 174]) in the distinctive journalistic culture of North-East England, which in turn was influenced by the print tradition of Scotland, another more democratic country. Stead borrowed ideas from both Scotland and America to turn the *Northern Echo* into a daily organ of new journalism (it is unlikely that he was influenced by Pulitzer [p. 170], who only bought his first St Louis paper in 1879, eight years after Stead began editing the *Northern Echo*). However, there is little mention of another route, the conscious and unconscious imitation of journalistic genres made possible by the circulation of newspapers and the reading practices of publishers and journalists.

In conclusion, while this book's scope, sources and methods seriously misrepresent the breadth and dynamism of 19th-century British journalism, it has many strengths. It provides a convincing long view of changes to daily papers in two important cities (offering a biographical route into the web of mutual influence), adds empirical support to the current interest in links between journalistic and novelistic genres, and is a useful exercise in comparative, transnational history in a field sorely in need of such approaches.

Notes

1. Joel Wiener, 'How new was the new journalism?' in *Papers for the Millions: The New journalism in Britain, 1850s to 1914*, ed. Joel Wiener (London, 1988), pp. 47–71; Joel Wiener, 'The Americanization of the British press, 1830—1914', *Studies in Newspaper and Periodical History*, 2 (1994), 61–74.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Graham Law, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press* (Basingstoke, 2000).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Joel Wiener, *The War of the Unstamped: the Movement to Repeal the British Newspaper Tax, 1830–1836* (London, 1969); *Papers for the Millions*.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Andrew Hobbs, 'When the provincial press was the national press (c.1836–c.1900)', *International Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 5 (2009), 16–43.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Lucy Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford, 1985), p.75.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Mark Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850–1950* (Chicago, IL, 2004).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. John Tulloch, 'The eternal recurrence of New Journalism' in *Tabloid tales: Global Debates over Media Standards*, ed. Colin Sparks and John Tulloch (Oxford, 2000), p.139.[Back to \(7\)](#)

The author will respond in due course.

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[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/21806>