

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

News and the British World. The Emergence of an Imperial Press System

Review Number:

427

Publish date:

Monday, 1 November, 2004

Author:

Simon Potter

ISBN:

199265127X

Date of Publication:

2003

Price:

£55.00

Pages:

246pp.

Publisher:

Clarendon Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

Chandrika Kaul

Simon Potter's book is a study of 'imperial integration' through the analysis of what he terms 'an imperial press system' which emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (p. 1). It focuses on the Dominions of Britain, or what has in recent historiography been referred to as the 'British world', embraced by a common sense of Britishness. Historians have argued that, by the end of the nineteenth century, the impact of the British model on Dominion press traditions had begun to be replaced by indigenous content 'fostering a national consciousness' in Australia, New Zealand and Canada (p. 14). In South Africa the picture was more complicated due to the ethnic divide. Potter's thesis counters this, however, by arguing that there existed an imperial realm of media discourse which was to an extent autonomous from the national context of the media. Further, he continues, this imperial-media sphere was not wholly or simply ideologically empire driven, but was shaped by the perceived commercial benefits and interests of proprietors and their business concerns. The book makes a convincing case in substantiating this thesis, which correlates with other recent work on the imperial news network.⁽¹⁾

Potter traces the links between the mother country and the Dominions that enabled the creation of an imperial press system, which was characterised more by 'mutual interdependence' than by the dominance of the British model (pp. 15-16). Journalists moved between metropole and periphery and enhanced the press

culture of each. Dominion journalists received preferential treatment in Britain on account of their 'perceived Britishness' (p. 23), and financially, too, there was Dominion dependence on the London money market. Non-British press models were often looked down upon, as in the case of Australia where 'Yankee journalism' was a term of abuse' (p. 25). Nevertheless, there was inevitably some influence exerted by US traditions 'as in Canada on papers like the Montreal *Star* and Toronto *Telegram*' as well as in Britain through the so-called 'New Journalism', and, indeed, Potter claims that by the early twentieth century there was 'no single Fleet Street model' (pp. 25-26). The spread of the telegraph networks also broke down the monopoly that British newspapers had exerted in terms of international news reports in the Dominion press. However, the high costs of such news led to the proliferation of Dominion telegraph and cable monopolies, with often restrictive practices.

The book has a broadly chronological structure and combines case studies, institutional analysis of entities like the Reuters news agency, and thematic chapters, which attempt to compare and contrast the experience of the different Dominion and the British press systems and the impact of political and economic developments. The bibliography has a range of primary and secondary sources 'though the provision of appendices or tables listing the circulation, price, political affiliation, ownership and other relevant data, of the newspapers consulted, as well as short biographies on key journalists, would have been of considerable help to the reader in navigating this complex field.

The case studies include the South African War (chapter 2), the First Imperial Press conference (chapter 6) and the First World War (chapter 8). There has been substantial revisionist interest in the two wars covered, and Potter's skill lies in re-evaluating the conclusions from such research 'on, for instance, official news manipulation and propaganda, the role of individual journalists and agencies like Reuters, the divisions within the British press, the key links between Dominion and British news networks' and imposing a persuasive alternative interpretation on how these fed into the creation and sustenance of the imperial press system and the viability of a common 'British world' news network. The 'virtual merging' of the South African and British press at the Cape, claims Potter in chapter 2, 'reflected underlying commercial forces that bound newspapers around the empire together' (p. 41). British papers developed close links with the political establishment and the latter used the media to try to win the propaganda and misinformation war. The Dominion press similarly relied on its British counterpart for news. Thus, despite great interest in New Zealand (as in Australia), the United Press Association (UPA) was 'keen to restrict the supply of news' due to the exorbitant costs involved. The Canadian press, however, devoted more men and outlay and had more copious coverage, largely bought through American channels, which in turn were substantially culled from the British press (p. 46-50). Such news network linkages had obvious implications for creating uniformity in coverage. The role of private telegraph cable operators, permitted to operate unrestricted by state intervention, as well as the interests of the large Dominion 'press combines' were, however, to prove two main hindrances to the 'consolidation of the embryonic press system' (p. 54). And it is to the role of the largest private news agency, Reuters, that Potter devotes chapter 4. Donald Read's study of the imperial dimensions of Reuters's worldwide network (2) has laid the crucial bedrock and parameters for any such discussion and there is less that is substantially novel in the conclusions reached here. Potter nevertheless succeeds in illustrating Reuters operations in the Dominions, the tensions that existed between domestic press combines and news agencies forming two angles, with the British and Dominion governments making up the third in the complex triangle of news networks that made up the 'British world'.

In the study of the Great War, Potter brings new perspectives to bear upon the operation of the British and Dominion press systems through an understanding of the ramifications of 'total war' and its impact in terms of more formalised censorship, direct official involvement in propaganda and publicity, the role of Lloyd George after 1916, the establishment of the Department and then Ministry of Information, and the role of press magnates like Beaverbrook and their interaction with the press. There was considerable direct patriotic involvement of British and Dominion journalists in pro-allied propaganda, as well as the successful activities of unofficial organisations and pressure groups to mobilise the imperial world for the war effort and imperial defence. Potter's research also makes a useful addition to the general analysis of Reuters and the war by Read. He argues that the war years saw intensified internecine commercial rivalries between the news

agencies, marked in the Australian case with the competition between the United Service and the Australian Press Association. Even more complex rivalries dominated the newspaper horizon. The desire of Reuters to dominate this market, though eventually successful, was fiercely resisted in these years (pp. 200-2). In Canada, wartime pressures led to the amalgamation of provincial agencies into the Canadian Press Limited with direct government subsidies. Once again Reuters, whose supply of wartime news to Canada had been subsidised by the British, sought to secure guarantees from the Canadian government and its Department of Public Information, which was keen to reduce the reliance on the Associated Press of the USA. A joint subsidy of the Canadian and British governments was mooted but fiercely resisted by Canadian press and agency interests, fearful of a loss of control over the inland distribution of international news (pp. 202-4). The eventual compromise saw new arrangements being reached between commercial press interests and Reuters after the end of the war, a system which marked the inter-war years and witnessed a resurgence of private interests and control over news distribution networks. Potter claims that, in general, the wartime experience created a sense of national patriotism which continued in the inter-war years to coexist with an adherence to a sense of 'shared Britishness' (p. 210), a loosely defined set of imperial values, fed, to a large extent, by a small group of news agencies. However, there were events in the immediate post-war years which divided British as well as Dominion press opinion, such as the unfolding crisis in Chanak in the demilitarised Dardanelles in 1922. Where the Montreal *Star* 'supported a Dominion contribution of troops unquestioningly', the Toronto *Star* felt troops should only be sent 'if absolutely necessary' (p. 209).

The third case study focuses on the First Imperial Press conference convened in London in 1909 at the behest of the British press. The conference was intended to consider a range of common issues affecting the newspapers of the empire, including the high press and cable rates, the monopolies of private cable companies, the spread of the telegraph network to encompass the empire's far-flung territories, the facilities available to press representatives in London, the wider role of the press in creating imperial unity and the impact that this would have on issues of imperial defence. In practice, though, as Potter emphasises, these ambitious objectives came up against the narrow commercial instincts of press and telegraph conglomerates in the Dominions and in the metropolis, and these proved the main stumbling block to negotiations and dictated the outcomes of the conference. While such an interpretation certainly holds true for many sections of the imperial media machines, there were also tangible gains attributable to the negotiations during the conference, as well as the creation of the Empire Press Union to further the common goals of the imperial press - for instance, the successful reduction in press telegraph rates. Further, the British empire was, to a large extent, an empire of sentiment, and, however elusive this entity, it was generally thought by contemporaries to have been significantly strengthened by the conferences, based as they were on a strong sense of the imperial purpose of the press. The close nexus of influence and cooperation that existed between the press and the political establishment - exemplified in the context of the conference, for instance, and by the enthusiasm of British politicians to address its proceedings and liaise with its delegates - has been analysed by, amongst others, Koss, whose books remain the best on the subject.⁽³⁾ Potter builds on this picture in chapter 7 and delineates how the press, despite commercialisation, 'remained inextricably bound up with the world of politics', which was predicated in turn upon the 'simultaneous strengthening of the imperial press system' (p. 160-1). He effectively details some of the complexities of this interaction within the Dominions as well as in Britain, where constructive imperialists as well as Liberals were equally keen to 'harness the opportunities offered by the press' (p. 184).

Chapter 3 discusses the role of the press and communications in the various movements initiated before the First World War to strengthen and deepen imperial unity. Potter examines the role of the so-called 'constructive imperialists' as well as Dominion governments, who were keen to exploit the potential for cheaper news to increase the flow of information around the empire - such as through cheaper cable rates and direct state control of cable lines (opposed by the British government) - and the inter-imperial trade, enhanced migration, and increased investment that this would inevitably encourage. Direct official attempts at publicity and at courting the British press were undertaken, such as by Australia, to enhance the attractiveness of Dominions as sites for investment of capital, labour and the exploitation of natural resources. With the exception of South Africa, large-scale Dominion advertisement campaigns through the press were also a hallmark of these years. In this sense, Potter argues, the *raison d'être* for improved

communications as 'a form of imperial preference', which underpinned the activities of constructive imperialists, 'seemed compatible with the economic interests of the Dominions' (p. 86).

In chapter 5, 'The British press and Dominion news', Potter claims that by 1909 such coverage of the Dominions 'was more comprehensive than it had been at any point in the past'. He provides rich illustrative material of the multiple links that existed between the centre and the Dominions at the level of both individuals as well as institutions. However, he acknowledges that newspapers in general had 'yet to solve the problem of providing cable news ... on an economical basis' (p. 131). In the second section of the chapter, Potter focuses on three quality newspapers - *The Times*, *The Standard* and the *Morning Post*. With their right-of-centre affiliation and staunch pro-empire stance, these newspapers would and did devote more attention to imperial news, so Potter's discussion, though interesting, is somewhat predictable. This ground has also been covered to some extent by, among others, Startt, K.M. Wilson and Koss (4), and this appears to be a somewhat missed opportunity given the efflorescence of the British press in this period and the centrality of this topic to the theme of the book. A wider spectrum of newspapers, both quality and popular, with their varying political affiliations, circulations and readerships, as well as the periodical press, would have thrown more light on the nuances inherent in any discussion of the press and politics.

The brief concluding chapter reiterates how Anglo-Dominion relations in general, as well as with reference to the 'imperial press system', grew 'stronger not weaker' in the years after the South African war (p. 212). The forces driving this phenomenon were less state intervention or primarily a sense of national identity, but commercial gain and a more complex sense of a transnational imperial identity favouring cooperation, with newspapers helping to 'sustain a multiplicity of identities' in the Dominions as well as in Great Britain (p. 215).

Overall, this is a well written book that makes a convincing case for the existence of an imperial press system that encompassed the British world during the high noon of empire. It also throws useful light on the press history of the white Dominions and South Africa and is a valuable addition to the fields of media and imperial history.

Notes

1. See C. Kaul, 'A New Angle of Vision: The London Press, Governmental Information Management and the Indian Empire, 1900-1922', *Contemporary Record*, 8.2 (1994), 213-41; C. Kaul, 'Imperial Communications, Fleet Street and the Indian Empire, c. 1850s-1920s' in ed. M. Bromley and T. O'Malley, *A Journalism Reader* (1997), 58-86; and C. Kaul, *Reporting the Raj: The British Press and India, c.1880-1922* (Manchester, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. D. Read, *The Power of News. The History of Reuters 1849-1989* (Oxford, 1992; 1999).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. S. Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain*, 2 vols.(1980; 1984).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. D. Startt, *Journalists for Empire* (Connecticut, 1991); *A Study in the History and Politics of the Morning Post*, ed. K. M. Wilson (Lampeter, 1990); and Koss, *Rise and Fall*.[Back to \(4\)](#)

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/427>

Links:

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2383>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>