

Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850–1950

Review Number:

528

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 June, 2006

Author:

Mark Hampton

ISBN:

0252029461

Date of Publication:

2004

Price:

£27.50

Publisher:

University of Illinois Press

Place of Publication:

Chicago

Reviewer:

Jacqueline Beaumont

Mark Hampton sets out to analyse 'the way in which British elites conceptualized the press between 1850 and 1950', examining the debates that helped to lead the British press to the point where 'informing readers and toppling governments, and never in boring fashion, could appear as the appropriate function of journalism'. As he remarks, although historians frequently use the press as a source, they rarely consider its place in modern British culture; and even when they do, they tend either to write biographies of particular newspapers and journalists or to quarry newspaper columns for particular subjects, such as gender or nationalism. His intention is to 'address the press itself as a category, over a substantial chronological period ... within the context of intellectual history'. His tools are not confined to a handful of established texts, such as the writings of Matthew Arnold, but embrace a wide ranging and rich collection of books and articles, sometimes named, often anonymous, usually but not invariably published, to address the important question of how the role of the press was seen by writers and intellectuals during his chosen period. The ideas which he studies are still relevant. We still worry about what our newspapers say, how they say it and their motivation for doing so. Hampton is surely right in arguing that the history of these preoccupations should be studied and, where possible, explained within the context of the many changes which took place in society during this period.

In the first chapter Hampton offers a thorough, well researched, dense overview of changes and refinements in the approach to developments in the press during his period. From the 'Whig' mythology of Fox-Bourne and other writers of the nineteenth century, to the modern critiques of Lee, Curran and many others, he chronicles the transformation of newspapers from small, sometimes occasional, providers of limited information and opinion to mass conveyors of news of all types; and from the age of censorship and government control to that of 'freedom' subject to market forces. (1) The developments which permitted these changes are the backdrop to debates about the role of the press with which he is primarily concerned.

The second chapter discusses the 'educational' ideal of the press, current in 1850, significant above all others for the next thirty years, and still a not negligible factor well into the twentieth century. This period was at the time seen as the golden age of the press, an opinion still largely held by most modern commentators. It was characterised by seriousness, both of the middle-class readership and of the newspapers, which were primarily concerned with quality journalism, less so with profit margins and turnover. Most historians of this reviewer's generation absorbed this view from the pages of Robert Ensor's volume in the Oxford History of England series, covering the period 1870 to 1940, which Hampton picks up on. Ensor was himself a Victorian and, for a time, in his youth, worked as a journalist on the *Manchester Guardian*. It says much for the status of journalism on such broadsheets at this time that a man like Ensor should gladly take employment on one, after failing to achieve his primary objective, a prize fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford. Nor was he unique in making this switch from academe to journalism. As Hampton comments, Ensor's view of the role and function of the press was rooted in the views of mid-Victorian intellectuals who attributed to the press the power to disseminate a range of high-minded virtues which they cherished. The press would provide both a forum for public discussion of topics of the moment and a means of transmitting 'right' thinking to a wider working-class audience. Where there were disagreements, it was confidently expected that the 'truth' must prevail and be disseminated. Hampton links this attitude to the mid-nineteenth-century concern for improvements of all kinds, and, in particular, to improvements in primary education. A better educated proletariat would be more able to read and absorb 'right' thinking from newspapers. This view of the press was considered to be essentially Liberal by Alan Lee. Hampton does not disagree with him, but he extends the embrace of the educational virtues of newspapers more widely. While Liberals might wish to see a more educated populace better able to undertake the obligations of a broadened franchise, Conservatives, concerned to avoid revolt and revolution, and to make the growing urban working classes more provident and biddable, and less inclined to listen to demagogues, saw education as a means of control. The authority of the written word in newspapers was an important tool in achieving the goal of a sober, thrifty, obedient working class, which knew its place. So, the educational role of the press was not a purely Liberal concept, as Lee thought, but quite general. This is an important point, and Hampton makes it well.

The educational view may seem today naive. Indeed, to some it already did so by the end of the nineteenth century. But it must be understood within the context of contemporary values. All the literature Hampton quotes stresses the importance of placing the public good ahead of self-interest, and this is as prominent in the thinking of newspaper editors as it was for other intellectuals and public figures. Such thinking is a part of the educational ideal. So too was the belief in rational public debate as the foundation of popular self-government. Expounded by John Stuart Mill in 1859, the arguments of *On Liberty* became standard. Education was the key to creating a settled society and encouraging political participation. The latter was essentially a middle-class occupation, but some thought that, in time, when they had been educated to understand it, the working classes might also participate, a view which persisted with regard to people of colour and women long after the franchise had been extended to the majority of adult males in Great Britain.

The educational ideal provoked a number of concerns expressed in the Press and elsewhere. First, there was the problem of the reading audience. Hampton cites a series of texts, culminating with an article of 1858 by Wilkie Collins, who bemoans the fact that people read the wrong sort of papers – silly illustrated magazines. There is, he argues, clearly a huge audience 'out there' just waiting to be taught 'how to read' (p. 59). Alongside this, others comment that the press had so changed the conditions of politics that the reading public had to be influenced. Information about political events was now freely available to the public in newspaper columns; so politicians had now to persuade newspaper readers that their policies were acceptable. Unsurprisingly these comments are found primarily in the press and periodicals; we are coming to the period when the press saw itself as the people's friend and representative, there to report and comment on events at all times, a Fourth Estate – a not unreasonable view in days when Parliament rose in August and rarely reassembled until the following February. Yet others remarked that the press was helping to create a critical public, which now had enough knowledge about any given topic to challenge the wit and wisdom of authority in the shape of the local clergyman. Hampton argues that such remarks demonstrate the challenge to prevailing cultural authority provided by newspapers and places this in the context of general discussion

about the overthrow of old authorities and institutions; more particularly, the decline in the position of the Church. There were also debates about the dangers of the rational debate being skewed, even stifled by circumstances, such as the profit motive or the preponderance of one or other political party.

Finally, in this section of the book, Hampton discusses two issues in which the educational ideal played a major role: the abolition of stamp duty and the argument about anonymity in the press. The 'educational ideal' of the press was widely disseminated between 1850 and the 1880s. It reflected, Hampton argues, 'a wide elite optimism in England's institutions, in the potential for "progress", in the possibilities for integrating the people into a politics by public discussion'. More fundamentally, this theory of the press reflected a confidence in the possibilities of rational communication and persuasion. It also had its blind spots, and was increasingly out of sympathy with prevailing conditions. Above all it never really came to grips with the inherent difficulty of reconciling the fundamental conflict between the two aspects of the educational ideal: the creation of a public discussion and the transmission of the 'right' ideas. The world had changed, consensus on a whole range of issues was less obvious; the newspaper world too had changed and was heading for mass industrial production. According to Alan Lee and Stephen Koss the golden era was being destroyed by the industrialisation of the press and the onset of the 'New Journalism'. (2) Hampton agrees that both these factors are undeniable, but he does not subscribe to Lee's view that they spelled the end of any kind of morality or serious debate about the role of the press. (3) The educational ideal did not die, he argues, but adapted and, where it was abandoned, it was replaced by another ideal, that of the press as a 'representative agency'.

The backbone of the old educational view had been the importance of 'opinion'. Gradually, Hampton argues, this became less important. He associates this change, less with the growth of the New Journalism, and more with the professionalisation of the journalist's calling and the growing realisation of editors that this was what people really wanted to read. At the heart of the new journalist's professional expertise was the gathering of 'facts' which he wanted to see fully represented in the pages of his paper. So discussion took a back seat in place of accurate reporting; the space available in a newspaper for 'opinion' was cut back until it comprised chiefly the Leader. Hampton then discusses a variety of 'educational' views which were trying to adapt to these changed circumstances.

Of these, one of the most interesting is George Binney Dibblee, journalist, business manager of the *Manchester Guardian*, and subsequently an academic. Dibblee is presented as a member of the educational school because he believed in the value of opinion. He considered that the press had lost its golden age during the Boer War, after which virtually all the quality papers were politically Conservative, leading to distortion of the truth. But Dibblee had been a man of business and therefore accepted the facts of journalism in practice. So he placed news first in his list of priorities, followed by opinion and then advertising. He also, unlike the traditional educational thinker, did not see facts as the raw material of opinion, but as a kind of opinion in themselves. In this he was unusual for that time, but not unique. In 1901 Leonard Courtney had written 'the selection of facts is made with a bias, and the very arrangement of the facts selected may involve an opinion'. (4) But, in general, news and opinion were seen as separate, with news now in the ascendant. The educational ideal survived, mainly among those on the left, and occasionally resurfaced, but it no longer had the general agreement of all.

It died back because of the commercialisation of the press, which invoked torrents of complaints from the old middle-class readership. They deplored the changes in newspaper presentation, which they blamed upon the pandering to the low tastes of the semi-educated masses who read papers, after enjoying the benefits of the 1870 Education Act, which were increasingly tailored to their capabilities. They were disgusted by the apparent wholesale takeover of the press by 'foreign capitalists' during the Boer war which destroyed the possibility of proper public debate. Hampton comments that they took the obvious, if expensive, course of purchasing or founding Liberal newspapers to redress the balance. They were particularly vehement in their criticisms of Alfred Harmsworth, founder of the *Daily Mail*, for whom circulation was far more important than supporting a particular political party or ideal, and who, it was thought, brought the entire press into disrepute with his stunts, his competitions, and his desire for 'scoops' which led to inaccuracy. It was recognised that the pace and tone of the press had changed. It was all due to the copying of American

practices.

It also suffered because of the waning belief in rational public discussion. Hampton traces this back to Mill who, in the same book in which he expounded it, expressed doubts as to its possibility, given the qualities of the masses. Mill was reinforced by other philosophers who increasingly doubted whether opinions were formed by reason, rather than history, personal experiences, or simply intuition. These new approaches lie beneath the change from an educational ideal to one of 'representing the people'. In this theory, newspaper readers are not endowed with rationality and newspapers do not prepare them for self-government, but themselves constitute an exercise in that self-government – they act as the Fourth Estate. Increasingly editors, journalists, even politicians, realising that public opinion could not be influenced or educated, sought to reflect it instead. As Hampton points out more than once, the change is not clear cut; old views are often to be found side by side with the new. But for those who lived by the New Journalism, this was the new orthodoxy. In practice it meant ensuring that the people were organised to defend their own interests, chiefly vis-à-vis Parliament, and explaining to them what those interests were. The classic figure in the prosecution of this model of journalism was W. T. Stead. As in so much else, Stead went to extremes in his belief that newspapers were far better at representing the people than was the House of Commons. Hampton comments that this democratic champion or 'representative of the people' wrote as the editor of a newspaper with a tiny, elite readership and the article in which he expressed these views appeared not in the daily press, but in a monthly review, and it was presented in the old 'educational' manner, as a rational argument to be discussed. Stead wrote it at a time when the representative argument was becoming standard. It received its fullest exposition from R. A. Scott-James who contributed the idea that there was more than one audience to be addressed and that these audiences needed different styles of newspapers. The old broadsheets catered for a more educated readership which wanted the old well-argued opinions. The new mass readership wanted something more popular. The educational view was appropriate for the first group, the representative for the second.

In his final chapter Hampton considers the way in which these two ideas developed during the first half of the twentieth century. Generally the new representative ideal prevailed, as one would expect in a period dominated by the press barons. The older ideal survived, but fitfully and with no real strength. The fate of the new Labour paper, the *Daily Herald*, is a case in point; Bevan wanted it to be in the older style; readers did not like it and within a few years the paper was staving off financial disaster by trying to appeal to everybody in order to build up its circulation. In the main, the educational ideal was confined to the BBC – which, being a monopoly, had no financial incentive to be entirely 'representative' – and a few nostalgic individuals, like Robert Ensor. But critics of the new status quo continued and became ever more vocal as the rise of Nazism made the prospect of propaganda ever more distasteful. And increasingly, too, the huge amount of advertising in all newspapers became a target for criticism, with suggestions that this, Dibblee's third essential, was now the first priority of a newspaper.

The book finishes with a brief consideration of the post World War II Royal Commission on the Press. Its completion date, 1949, does not fully justify the centennial dates in the title. This book starts well before 1850 and ends in the 1930s. But this is not a criticism, for Hampton's treatment of events and arguments in the first half of the nineteenth century are essential to an understanding of the points he makes. The heart of the book focuses on the nineteenth century and comprises a clever, exceptionally well informed and densely textured rethinking of what the press meant to those writing in it and reading it at the time. As a corrective to the familiar arguments of scholarship now more than forty years old, and as a piece of intellectual history, it is stimulating and mind stretching. Although Hampton writes well, it is not easy to read and some reflection is often necessary – and well worth the effort. Such a book is not often written and is required reading for anybody interested in the culture of this period.

Notes

1. *Newspaper History from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day*, ed. George Boyce, James Curran and Pauline Wingate (1978). [Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* (2 vols, 1981). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Alan Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press in England, 1855–1914* (1976). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. L. H. Courtney, 'The Making and Reading of Newspapers, address delivered on February 8th 1901', *Contemporary Review* (March, 1901). [Back to \(4\)](#)

The author thanks Dr Beaumont for her kind and generous review and does not wish to comment further.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/528#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2936>

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