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Martin Conboy

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Aligning the Newspaper and the People: Defining the Popular in the British Press

MARTIN CONBOY
University of Sheffield
m.conboy@sheffield.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The *Daily Mirror* developed as the first general picture daily in Britain and had become the nation's best-selling daily newspaper by the end of the First World War. Its turn to the political left came from the mid-1930s as a marketing ploy to establish a distinctive identity within a crowded middle-market. This commercially astute targeting of a mass readership, delivering the most successful daily newspaper in British history by the mid-1960s, illustrates a great deal of the complexity of the term 'popular' when used in relation to mass media. It drew on the traditions of best-selling magazines, Sunday newspapers, and American tabloid pioneers combined with modern techniques of market research to identify a new and broad readership. The explicit integration of readers' views, deployment of brash headlines, and a bold page layout highlighting photography, in editorial combination, made the paper the forerunner of a distinctly British tabloid style that would become a world-leading trend. Magazine-style features had flowed between various forms of periodicals in Britain throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but it was the *Daily Mirror* that perfected an appeal to a young, left-of-centre, popular readership that had hitherto been largely ignored by publishers; an approach that included appealing to female readers in a distinctly 'modern' way. This article will centre on definitions of the popular in the formative era 1935–45 and the impact that such a style of popular newspaper would eventually have on the entire British market. In preparing the way for later manifestations of the magazine-newspaper, popular hybrids such as the *Sun* and the later version of the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Mirror* can be seen as the prototype of not just the popular tabloid that would come to dominate the British market but also of the shift to a 'tabloid culture' that continues to inform our contemporary legacy and digital news environments.

KEYWORDS

popular culture, tabloid, popular press, *Daily Mirror*, Britain

Historical Context

Tabloid newspapers are the most commercially successful manifestation of popular print culture. Most prominent from the mid-twentieth century to the dawn of the digital age, and still a significant presence in the contemporary news environment in both print and online versions, it must be stressed that the tabloid has its roots firmly planted in longer traditions of exchange between print and popular culture.¹ Indeed, so well embedded are certain of its characteristics that the tabloid might be considered a communicative genre before it appeared through the confluence of various technological and commercial developments as a specific newspaper product. If we consider, for example, the woodcut illustrations of a two-headed pig widely disseminated across various language areas in printed pamphlets from the sixteenth century, it is clear that the sensational and even gruesome were intended to boost interest and sales from the beginning of the print era in Europe.² Added to this, the graphic rumour-mongering of the partisan English Civil War periodicals, with apparitions, strange monsters, and the world turned upside down indicated an early adoption of attention-grabbing political news.³

The Popular as a Historical Category

Before considering the ways in which the British mass daily press in the interwar years aligned itself within the contours of popular culture, we would do well to initiate discussions how the expression ‘popular culture’ entered into historical studies of Western societies and then reflect upon how the newspapers of the mid-twentieth century matched or departed from those definitions.

Raymond Williams uses journalism and the press as key touchstones in his definition of the popular, indicating the dialogic complexity of its cultural associations and shifts in meaning over time:

Popular was being seen from the point of view of the people rather than from those seeking favour or power from them [...]. Popular culture was not identified by *the people* but by others, and it still carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work (cf. popular literature, popular press as distinguished from *quality press*); and work deliberately setting out to win favour (popular journalism as distinguished from *democratic journalism* or popular entertainment); as well as the more modern sense of well-liked by many people, with which of course, in many cases, the earlier senses overlap.⁴

From the fifteenth century in Europe, print ushered in an era of local language publications as a break from the manuscript circulation of Latin texts. Targeting a vernacular readership guaranteed more sales, even in a period of low literacy levels. These publications, aimed at both the common reader and witnesses to their public reading and performance, tried, as best they could, to echo demotic speech. The combination of the residue of oral culture with the visual display of early woodcuts brought together

1 *Global Tabloid: Culture and Technology*, ed. by Martin Conboy and Scott Eldridge II (Abingdon: Routledge, forthcoming 2021).

2 Martin Conboy, *The Press and Popular Culture* (London: Sage, 2002), p. 24.

3 Sheila Connell, *The Popular Print in England, 1550–1850* (London: British Museum Press, 1999), pp. 9–31.

4 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana/Croom Helm, 1976), p. 199.

layout, typography, and image in a highly successful and profitable product.⁵ Not only was printing one of the primary movers in the shift from folk to popular culture according to Burke but printers, more prosaically, had sought to maximize profit from their investment in the machinery of printing since Gutenberg adapted a wine press to produce printed pages for circulation.⁶ To achieve this, they standardized their formats and relied on a carnivalesque inversion of hierarchies already implicit in the deployment of the vernacular in order to appeal to a general popular audience.⁷ Popular print culture emerged, thus, already deeply marked by a lack of deference in its broadside ballads and unauthorized, and often scurrilous, printed accounts. This starting point had been amplified, but no more, by the mid-twentieth century heyday of the popular press in Britain, illustrating what has been observed about this early popular print culture: ‘To a modern reader, the parallel between broadsides or chap-books and the “mass culture” of the contemporary world is likely to be striking.’⁸

Technology and the Popular Press: Harnessing Aesthetic to Mass Market

What enabled the press of the early modern period to eventually develop into the modern tabloid form of the popular was an astute combination of the social and the technological. In order to maintain and increase profits, the owners of periodical publications invested in technologies that would attract broader readerships among increasingly literate populations. Initially, however, in order to enable advertisers to bolster their commercial model, most newspapers were happier to concentrate on periodicals that were safely targeted towards the commercially invested middle classes.

Technological developments were adopted to maximize the profits promised by steam-driven innovation in the nineteenth century, in large part, enabling elements of popular print culture to become truly a mass popular cultural product by the mid-twentieth century. Mass circulation required vastly accelerated printing speeds. Richard Hoe’s succession of rotary presses from 1846, culminating in the four-cylinder ‘lightning press’, achieved a capacity of 20,000 sheets per hour.⁹ In this system, the type was locked onto the cylinders and constituted the first shift away from the flat-bed system used since Gutenberg. These machines were so dominant and successful in their home market in the United States that they were exported to Britain and Europe, where they drove the development of successive waves of popular newspapers. Growing in size and power, by the early twentieth century, such machines had been refined so as to produce 60,000 complete papers per hour.¹⁰

At the same time as printing speeds were increasing, a shift from rag-based to wood-pulp paper, processed by improved machines developed by the Paganstecher brothers from 1867, provided the raw material for the expanding press with such success that by the 1880s, rag paper was no longer used in mass production. Without wood-pulp paper, cheap, mass circulation of multi-page newspapers would not have been possible. Allied to improved speeds and the ability to print on continuous rolls, a

5 Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 130–31; Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 8–10.

6 Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (London: Temple Smith, 1978), pp. 49–51.

7 Conboy, *The Press and Popular Culture*, pp. 18–19.

8 Burke, p. 245.

9 Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: The Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), p. 128.

10 George A. Isaacs, *The Story of the Newspaper Printing Press* (London: Co-Op Printing Society, 1931), p. 69.

further benefit of the cheaper wood-pulp paper was that it could better capture images of the fashions, consumer goods, and commodities that filled the new department stores of the late nineteenth century. This advance in the quality of paper enabled the plate advertising that added attractive images and brand identification to the growing appeal of the mass daily press and magazines.

Moreover, the quality of the presentational aspects of the press was improving all the time. For instance, the stereotyping process, adopted in London, Paris, and New York at around the same time at the end of the nineteenth century, had the benefit of allowing banner headlines to be spread across the page, breaking up the traditional one column template thus making the pages easier on the eye.¹¹ Although the half-tone screening process had enabled crude and occasional photographic reproduction in the press, the daily press in Britain had to wait until after 1895 for the introduction of rotogravure from Germany, allied to a system of ‘offsetting’, in which half-tone photographs and print were transferred onto a rubber blanket to enable the incorporation of photography into the demands of editorial layout, leading to daily illustrated newspapers such as the *Daily Mirror* from 1904 and the *Daily Sketch* (1909). Photographs appeared to offer a visual immediacy to justify journalism’s increasing assertions of its veracity. The inclusion of photographs into the print layout enhanced aesthetic awareness in arranging print and creating a structure to further guide the reader’s eye within cross-heads and white space. In addition, with the development of smaller, hand-held cameras from the 1920s, photography in daily newspapers could reinforce journalism’s claims to eye-witnessing and acted to heighten the emotional appeal of images.¹²

Intensive investment in advanced machinery enabled the production of a commodity with such economies of scale, enhanced by greater sales and wider reach for advertising, that prices were driven down while the resources of newspapers to promote themselves to those growing markets increased. Accelerated printing and distribution techniques were integrated within expanding rail networks, and by the early twentieth century these were supplemented by motorized vehicles on the roads. In combination, the material basis now existed for a mass popular press in Britain in the twentieth century.

Britain’s First Popular Press

Whereas America had its penny press as a daily phenomenon from the 1830s, in Britain the prototype for a mass press was the Sunday newspaper which provided the largest circulations of up to a million sales per week by the end of the nineteenth century before the advent of the mass popular daily newspapers.¹³ Despite the early launch of the *Observer* in 1791, the real expansion of the Sunday press was to come as it broke from an exclusively bourgeois model aimed at a readership assumed to be mostly interested in politics and commerce, and began to target working-class and artisan readerships as newspapers became cheaper in the wake of staged reductions in stamp duties from the 1830s onwards.

The combination that would provide a successful form of Sunday journalism was compiled from a variety of already existing topics: sport, crime, and sensation. Two of

11 Brian Winston, *Messages: Free Expression, Media and the West from Gutenberg to Google* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 125.

12 Jens Jäger, ‘Eyewitnesses? The Visual Depiction of Events around 1900’, in *Journalism and Technological Change: Historical Perspectives, Contemporary Trends*, ed. by Martin Schreiber and Claus Zimmermann (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2014), pp. 165–84 (p. 167).

13 Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspaper* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), pp. 1–120.

the Sunday newspapers launched in the mid-century that were to acquire long-term significance were *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* (1842) and *Reynolds's Newspaper* (1850). *Lloyd's Illustrated Weekly Paper*, as it was called until 1843, was a blend of populist politics and the sensationalism and illustration that were to become staples of the Victorian Sunday paper. *Reynolds's Newspaper*, first published as *Reynolds's Weekly Newspaper* in 1850 and changing its title in 1851, provided a slightly different emphasis within its political range. The owner, George Reynolds, had been a leading figure in the Chartist movement and, although he initially maintained his overt political stance in a signed front-page political polemic, he gradually developed a blend that would appeal to the widest potential readership while maintaining an appeal to advertisers likely to be put off by too provocative a radical stance. He provided a newspaper that was written with an ear for the assumed preferences and prejudices of its readers, emphasizing the melodramatic elements rehearsed in his own successful novels as a key to his paper's tone. From a political perspective, these Sunday papers had, towards the end of the nineteenth century, a reputation as radical sounding yet politically unfocused, described in 1880, in the veteran Tory publication, the *Quarterly Review*, as:

The staple of the leading articles is discontent — discontent with the laws, with the Constitution, with the governing classes, with the employers of labour, with everything, in short, which is not of the lowest working-man level. Socialism and Republicanism are not indistinctly indicated as the objects to be aimed at in modern politics, and so no opportunity is lost of comparing the virtues of the working-classes with the vices of an 'effete aristocracy'.¹⁴

Mark Hampton has provided an illuminating account of a key shift in the ambitions and reach of newspapers from this juncture, arguing that they moved from attempting to educate audiences in an overt, didactic fashion to mapping onto the perceived tastes and existing knowledge of their readers and advertising as markets; from an 'educational ideal' to a 'representative ideal'.¹⁵

From Popular Print to the Tabloid Newspaper

The shift from mass popular to the tabloid proper was initiated by the New York 'circulation wars' between Pulitzer's *New York World* (from 1883) and Hearst's *New York Journal* after its entry into the market in 1895. These culminated in what became known as 'yellow journalism', characterized by 'scoops' of dubious taste and veracity, screaming bold headlines, an emphasis on the sensational, in combination with an astute courting of the readership as a community of opinion. Once technological advances enabled print and photography to combine in sensationalizing the news in an easily accessible format the shift to the tabloid layout became established.

Early tabloids in format such as the original British *Daily Mirror* and its successor, the *Daily Illustrated Mirror*, and American versions such as the *Illustrated Daily News* from 1919 were almost entirely made up of pictures but eventually the tabloid would develop a judicious blend of bold headlines, illustrations, and attractively laid-out copy. The first newspaper that could claim to be tabloid in both format and content was the *Illustrated Daily News* in the US, described as following these directions, stressing the popular nature of the project:

¹⁴ Thomas Catling, 'The Newspaper Press', *Quarterly Review*, 150 (1880), 521–22.

¹⁵ Mark Hampton, *Visions of the Press: 1850–1950* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

Each day play up one story, preferably related to crime, sex or heroic achievement. [...] Stand vigorously upon an editorial platform which is broad enough to permit policy to be liberal, conservative, patriotic or moral as the occasion seems to demand but never forget that the tabloid's causes must be popular causes, at least in name. Practice a limited, colourful vocabulary. In sum, produce a picture newspaper which is a compendium of extraordinary happenings and simple comment, exciting, entertaining, reassuring and couched in the living language of the day.¹⁶

Philip Payne, who edited the US tabloids the *Daily News* and the *Daily Mirror*, is quoted by John Stevens as saying that his goal was to illustrate every story with a photograph — 'the very essence of tabloidism'. Stevens goes on to argue that this created an instant product-consumer bond since photography 'conveyed a story in a flash and made the reader feel he was part of the event'.¹⁷

The Rebirth of the *Daily Mirror*

In the UK, the *Daily Mirror* started life in 1903 as a daily pictorial newspaper for 'gentlewomen' produced entirely by women. Its owner, Alfred Harmsworth, was as adventurous as ever in pursuing the greatest levels of diversification in the mass popular newspaper market and yet, unusually, it treated him to an unprecedented experience of failure. To remedy this, it was relaunched from 1904 as a daily pictorial paper, still with a distinct eye on women readers. Its highpoint of success in this guise was World War One, when it rose to become a million-selling paper and boasted in 1919 that it was the best-selling daily picture paper in the world. This success did not last. As the forces of competition in the daily popular market were intensifying, a slow but steady decline in its circulation was compounded by the success of three major popular dailies in the 1930s: the *Daily Herald*, *Daily Mail*, and *Daily Express*. These purveyors of mass market daily news vied with each other to find the best ways to develop the 'intimacy of tone' that readers had appreciated in the periodical publications of George Newnes in the late Victorian period and which had acted as such an early inspiration to Harmsworth and others.¹⁸

The Popular as a Market Strategy

According to Williams, one category of the popular is reserved for 'well-liked by the people' or commercially successful. This was certainly the main motivator for a small but powerful range of newspapers in early twentieth-century Britain. Alongside the elite, opinion-forming newspapers of record, such as the *Times* or the *Daily Telegraph*, the mass market newspapers were making their mark, not to say their money, by appealing to the largest circulation among a non-elite, popular readership and reaping the rewards of vast advertising revenue. By the 1930s, under various pressures, including perceived threat to circulation from the emergent technology of radio, a fierce circulation war broke out among the most widely circulated newspapers.

With so many competing national daily mass-popular newspapers (*News Chronicle*, *Daily Herald*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*) the mass market had truly arrived, and competition for readers in the 1920s and 1930s led to a ruthless rationalization

16 Simon Bessie, *Jazz Journalism: The Story of the Tabloid Newspaper* (New York: Dutton, 1938), p. 131.

17 John Stevens, *Sensationalism and the New York Press* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 119–20.

18 Kate Jackson, *George Newnes and the New Journalism in Britain, 1880–1910: Culture and Profit* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 13.

within the daily newspaper market.¹⁹ These papers boosted their circulations by special offers, for example free subscriptions, free gifts such as books, quizzes and competitions, sponsorship of outdoor concerts during the summer, carefully targeted campaigns to win and retain readers, all woven within a rhetoric of appeal to readers as distinctive communities. The *Daily Herald*, supported by and sympathetic to the trade-union movement, was the first to formally relaunch on 17 March 1930, racing to over two million regular daily sales. The *Daily Express* followed up with innovations in layout and design from the summer of 1933, creating a paper with a lively and fresh look, using a combination of white space, frequent bold headlines, and pictures to emphasize stories from everyday life as well as the lives of the rich and famous. In contrast, amidst the social and economic disaster of mass unemployment, a sentimental tone was adopted to the plight of the workless while popular escapism was provided as an antidote to the political realities of the age.²⁰ In the same month in 1933, the *Daily Mail* came up with its own version of the modern mass popular and, as with the *Daily Express*, it was keen to distance itself from trade-union activity or political radicalism; both could be seen to encapsulate the ‘respectable popular’.

The tone is divided between two styles of approach to the readers of mass-market papers. One, represented by the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail*, eased readers towards an escapist perspective that implies that the world was in the hands of businessmen and politicians who could be trusted to work on behalf of the ordinary people, who, in turn, should be content with their lot and were encouraged within this framework to enjoy the delights of their newspaper. The other, in contrast, represented by a range of left-wing newspapers, consisted of more serious-minded and party affiliated publications such as the *Daily Herald*, the Communist Party’s *Daily Worker*, and even the Liberal *News Chronicle*. This variant exhorted its readers to actively engage in the organization of political resistance to the excesses of capitalism and political extremism.

The newspaper that was not only failing to maintain forward momentum in this competitive market but was also slipping rather dramatically behind its putative rivals was the *Daily Mirror* which had disappointed the expectations of its owners as it drifted towards a mid-market position with a circulation that had slumped to 720,000 by 1934. At this point, future editorial director Hugh Cudlipp assessed its problem, as follows, indicating a perceptive identification of the shortcomings of a paper that sought a wide readership; in every way the opposite of the popular:

The *Mirror* printed news and views that all the other papers printed; it had no identity, no personality of its own, no *raison d’être*.

It directed its appeal to the declining but still well-to-do middle class. It was the paper for the folk who annually holidayed for a month or so in Scotland or the South of France, enjoyed the long weekend, had tea at the tennis club and motored in the country.²¹

It was decided that something had to be done to revive the fortunes of the newspaper within this increasingly competitive market. The rise of the American-driven practice of market surveys played a significant part in this development. All newspapers in the UK were now being scrutinized for the first time by sophisticated tracking of sales by the Audit Bureau of Circulation from 1931. This could tell newspapers, but more

19 Martin Conboy, *Journalism in Britain: A Historical Introduction* (London: Sage, 2011), pp. 48–50.

20 Conboy, *The Press and Popular Culture*, pp. 117–18.

21 Hugh Cudlipp, *Publish and be Damned! The Astonishing Story of the Daily Mirror* (London: Andrew Dakers, 1953), pp. 53–54.

importantly advertisers, how many and what sort of readers their products were reaching. American marketing advisers from J. Walter Thompson analysed the *Daily Mirror* and its market. Their conclusion was that there was an imbalance, with more right-wing newspapers than the market could sustain.²² What was more likely to succeed was a newspaper that could encompass a broader appeal to a politically non-aligned, young working class audience, both male and female, while spicing things up with the sort of entertainment and humour to be found in many of the mass market dailies.²³ This was the confident assumption that drove the relaunch of the *Daily Mirror* to tap into this hitherto neglected demographic.

One of the most common assertions in the history of newspapers is that it is extraordinarily difficult to change the identity of a newspaper, whether politically or in terms of its audience. Attempts to do this in a short period of time have almost always met with disastrous failure. In contradicting this, the steady hand at the editorial helm was Harry Guy Bartholomew. Maurice Edelman has tried to capture something of the character of the man by using Bartholomew's own rhetoric:

Though the 'Establishment' was still an object of reverence, 'Bart', as everyone called him, was against it. Long before the aristocracy and its imitators in Britain recognized that their authority was crumbling, Bart spontaneously pointed out to the millions of working-class and lower middle-class readers of the *Mirror* that they mattered, that many of the old accepted and snobbish values were bunk, that stuffed prigs should not be taken at their self-assessment, and that you didn't have to be a public school man to have worthwhile views.²⁴

Cecil King, *Mirror* owner Northcliffe's nephew and a key member of the board of directors, later admitted that it was an enterprise 'launched in cynicism', a 'technical exercise in journalism', 'dissipated by the waves of affection and loyalty which came swelling up from the band of readers'.²⁵

The popular press through the 1930s had been converging towards a more conversational style of journalism to appeal to 'the man on the Rhyl promenade... the people in the backstreets of Derby'.²⁶ All newspapers, especially ones with aspirations to mass readerships, were by the 1930s tending towards an appreciation that their readers were developing a taste for a livelier presentation of news. Increased illustration, clearer layout on the page, more white space, and more focus on human interest in stories were all evidence of this as several newspapers entered into an era of circulation wars.²⁷ The relaunched *Daily Mirror* would aim for increased appeal and, therefore, sales to their newly identified demographic by experimenting with features that articulated opposition to the notion that those in authority knew better. The *Daily Mirror* began to invest serious editorial time trying to find a vocabulary that its readers identified with. Henry Fairlie called this the 'successful projection of personality'. Illustrating this by the constructed editorial dialogue of the 'Old Codgers' who regularly responded in print to writers of letters he wrote:

22 Martin Pugh, 'The Daily Mirror and the Revival of Labour 1935–1945', *Twentieth Century British History*, 9 (1998), 420–38 (p. 426).

23 Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 44–45.

24 Maurice Edelman, *The Mirror: A Political History* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1966), p. 38.

25 Cecil King quoted in Cudlipp, p. 104.

26 Arthur Christiansen, *Headlines All My Life* (London: Harper Row, 1961), p. 2.

27 Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy, *Tabloid Century: The Popular Press in Britain from 1896 to the Present Day* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 12–13.

No other feature in British journalism so superbly creates the atmosphere of the public bar, in which everyone sits cosily round the scrubbed deal tables, arguing the toss about anything which happens to crop up, while the Old Codgers buy pints of mixed for the dads, and ports and lemon for the dear old mums.²⁸

This point has been reinforced by journalist Matthew Engel, who described the appeal of the paper in these terms:

In the fuggy atmosphere of a bare-floored pre-war pub, the *Mirror* was the intelligent chap leaning on the counter of the bar: not lah-di-dah or anything — he liked a laugh, and he definitely had an eye for the girls — but talking a lot of common sense.²⁹

This style of linguistic appeal had long been identified as part of the appeal of the popular press with Bennett's *New York Herald* having been fêted for its use of the language of the common man as long ago as the early nineteenth century: 'remembered not so much for what it said as for *how* it said it'.³⁰ But the *Daily Mirror* was the first to shape this paradigm to a specific class demographic. Previously, mass-market newspapers had attempted and to a large extent succeeded in straddling the 'respectable classes' or the serious, politically affiliated working classes in the *Daily Herald*.

The *Daily Mirror* slowly eased into its new identity. Experiments with large, thick bold-type headlines can be seen throughout the paper from November 1934. The type and the tone of the headlines begin to embrace more of the American tabloid tradition of sensationalized reporting, as here in a series on crime in Brighton from the front page of 26 November 1934, tiered with persistent typographical emphasis:

MURDER ON GOLF LINKS

Girl Shot, Strangled & Thrown Into Water

MAN CHARGED AFTER TORCHLIGHT HUNT ON THE DOWNS

Despite the prominence and the novelty, at least in the British context, of these bold capitalized headlines, it was not in the reformatting of the newspaper itself that the 'tabloid' revolution lay, since it already was of tabloid size, nor was it only to do with its typography. The increased emphasis on the colloquial and the display of sensation ushered in by Bartholomew combined in a particular form of demotic address.³¹ This was supported politically by the work of Richard Jennings, who came into his own as a socialist polemicist and working-class features assistant, and Cudlipp, together with William Connor (as 'Cassandra') who began work for the new *Daily Mirror* on the same August Bank Holiday in 1935. Anthony C. H. Smith has claimed that it was this particular editorial combination that enabled the newspaper to find its finely tuned representation of the lived experience and voices of its audience.³²

For example, scepticism concerning politicians had always been a feature in periodical publications that addressed the suspicions of ordinary people. It was perhaps

28 Henry Fairlie, 'Brilliance skin deep: The case of the *Daily Mirror*', *Encounter* (July 1957), 8–14 (p. 11).

29 Matthew Engel, *Tickle the Public: One Hundred Years of the Popular Press* (London: Gollancz and Prentice-Hall, 1996), p. 161.

30 Michael Emery and Edwin Emery, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992), p. 102.

31 Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy, 'The *Daily Mirror* and the Creation of a Commercial Popular Language', *Journalism Studies*, 10 (2009), 639–54 (pp. 641–43).

32 Anthony C. H. Smith, *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change, 1935–1965* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), p. 64.

no surprise that, in the run-up to the General Election of 1935, the anti-Establishment credentials of the paper were flexed in the spirit of a piece that launched a series of letters defying any deference to political candidates and rather stressing the negative response of individual readers to the deficiencies of politicians: ‘The Man Who Won’t Get My Vote.’³³ However, this uniform dismissal of politics as a game played by the Establishment, inevitably of little interest to the working man and woman, began to shift during the Spanish Civil War. In fact, it has been observed that ‘the *Mirror* was profoundly influenced by international events around 1935–36, and by 1939 it had become a central element in the tide of opinion that was shortly to envelop the parliamentarians’.³⁴

The style with which the *Daily Mirror* represented the Spanish Civil War came to be an essential element in the future rhetorical appeal to its working-class readers: a popular style for a proletarian readership. This meant that its language was being formed to a significant extent by its engagement on behalf of its target readership with contemporary international politics long before the outbreak of the Second World War, allowing it to hone its particular linguistic style to particular commercial ends. Initially, the *Mirror*’s early attempts to reconfigure itself along the lines of an American tabloid style framed the war in Spain with sensationalist emphasis or in terms of its increased reliance on personality and human interest as indicators of the news value of overseas events, as seen in the following headlines:

PRIESTS BEHEADED AND NUNS STRIPPED NAKED BY MOB³⁵

Bridegroom in Britain — Bride in Spain

MAN WAITS FOR TELEGRAM TO SAY HE IS WED³⁶

The letters pages with responses from the curmudgeonly soon-to-be-christened ‘Old Codgers’ were used to put radical opinions firmly back in their place, as evidenced in the following:

Our Live-Letter Box

Enter a Rebel

‘WORKING MAN ESSEX WRITES TO THE ‘DAILY MIRROR’: —

‘Don’t you think the poorer classes should rise and revolt against the people who think themselves “it”? It would certainly clear the air of so much hatred that the working class is storing up’.

AND THE ‘DAILY MIRROR’ WRITES TO ‘WORKING MAN’: —

Don’t be so melodramatic!

Who told you that a revolution clears away hatred? Look at Spain.³⁷

This contrasts with a later piece commissioned from the socialist scientist John Haldane and commented upon by a leading article as the voice of the newspaper. It appears to be a direct assault on the previously middle-class sensitivities of the newspaper’s readership and challenges the non-committal attitude to the conflict to be found elsewhere in the paper. The title seems to sum up this perspective, as it invites readers to:

33 *Daily Mirror* (4 November 1935), 10.

34 Pugh, p. 424.

35 *Daily Mirror* (24 July 1936), 3.

36 *Daily Mirror* (29 July 1937), 1.

37 *Daily Mirror* (20 August 1936), 12.

CALL HIM A 'RED'

On the opposite page to-day we publish an article about Spain by Professor Haldane, the eminent biologist.

You will see that it is not a violent article. It is mainly descriptive.

But you will also see that, prompted by the pouring of German and Italian troops into Spain, Professor Haldane 'offered his services' to the Spanish Government.

Whereupon — woe upon this English intellectual, who has thus followed the example of the majority of Spanish intellectuals! From the better-class villas of Bath, Bournemouth, Cheltenham and Chislehurst a great howl of 'Red!' will surely arise [...].

Whereas the puppet of Germany and Italy who is slaughtering his own countrymen with foreign aid is, of course, the Saviour of Society — as that word is understood amongst the muffins and crumpets of Villadom.³⁸

Whereas, from a linguistic perspective, the conflict was initially presented in the semantics of simplistic opposition characteristic of much tabloid language, drawing on the binaries of melodrama, the *Daily Mirror* in its editorials and in particular in the opinion pieces by Cassandra, moved significantly to a combination of familiar language, mild swearing and left politics, highlighting class conflict in Spain and at home in Britain among both the political and aristocratic classes.³⁹

Cassandra wrote, using unusually strong language for the time, sarcastically about the British Prime Minister in his foreign negotiations:

They told me at Gibraltar that they couldn't make out what the hell the British government was playing at but they simply could not believe that the situation was as desperate as it appeared at first sight and that we probably had some pretty good aces up our sleeves. They were at a loss to suggest what those aces might be. So am I. I hope Neville [Chamberlain] isn't.⁴⁰

He was also the first to extend the editorial approach of the newspaper in asserting that the Civil War was a class conflict and in attempting to locate it historically:

One thing strikes me very strongly about this murderous war. It is largely a class struggle — there's no doubt about it. The peasant in Spain has for centuries lived in a state of unparalleled misery and poverty. This war has been an attempt to throw off the yoke and it has failed. The price is reckoned and will be paid in blood.⁴¹

Pushing on with his polemic, he used the context of the Civil War in Spain to highlight the self-interest of the wealthy, leisured classes, implicitly antagonistic to the targeted working class readers of the paper and critically suggested that the interests of the forces unleashed by Franco and his supporters in the UK are lining up against both British interests and the interests of the Soviet-aligned opposition to fascism.

What has become of the Friends of Franco in the country? Presumably they too are on holiday [like Chamberlain]. And as they fish or play golf they have the

38 *Daily Mirror* (20 January 1937), 11.

39 Bingham and Conboy, 'The Daily Mirror and the Creation', p. 644.

40 *Daily Mirror* (16 February 1939), 14.

41 *Daily Mirror* (17 February 1939), 11.

satisfaction of seeing that their hero has celebrated the end of the cruel war he forced upon the Spanish people by joining the growing group of our declared enemies in the so-called anti-Comintern Pact otherwise the anti-British Commonwealth alliance of Germany Italy and Japan the pro-Franco nincompoops here supposed, on the contrary, that the wretched puppets would come asking for our money.⁴²

Epistolary Strategy

One of the chief strategies to achieve a new, commercially successful identity was in courting the interests and lifestyles of its readers with direct invitations to contribute in the form of letters.⁴³ The post bag was, according to the editor, the proof of their success — as well as increased circulation and revenue from advertisers happier to display their products to a demographic hitherto rather neglected by the daily press. The letters were also used as triggers to launch other editorial or feature contributions, thereby grafting the contributions of readers onto a national editorial agenda. This enabled the paper to align reader and political and social viewpoint seamlessly within a national popular context.

Writing specifically of the linkage between features and readers' responses in letters Cudlipp explained:

We were setting out to prove that the experiences of ordinary men and women could make exciting reading, and it was not the meagre prize of ten-and-sixpence which attracted them; here at last was a national newspaper dealing sensibly, sympathetically and understandingly with their own problems and which published their own views.⁴⁴

This strategy of incorporating the views and even echoes of the language of the readers was experimental from the start and therefore did not crystalize immediately. Rather, it emerged in dialogue with readers' preferences, often expressed through this same epistolary channel. Although editorial decisions and commercial choices about the identity of the newspaper underpinned the paper's evolution, the readers were, nevertheless, given more explicit credit within the paper as they were asked to contribute from their own experiences and tastes to the content of a paper which could increasingly be presented as 'their paper'. The first notable experiment came as early as January 1935:

YOUR LIFE IS NEWS

From millionaires to bootboys — from duchesses to charladies — other people's lives are strange, novel, exciting — to everyone except themselves.

The 'Daily Mirror' wants YOUR life stories — will pay 10s 6d if it's printed...

Initial contributions were captioned in concert with the sensational style of the rest of the newspaper's headlines:

I am Cinderella and I like it

A man who broods upon his dreadful secret

42 *Daily Mirror* (10 April 1939), 11.

43 Conboy, 'British Popular Newspaper Traditions', pp. 128–33.

44 Cudlipp, p. 86.

Ain't Love Grand?
No One Envy's my Life.⁴⁵

Triggers included invitations to send in embarrassing stories and opinions on selected topics such as film stars, politicians, and world conferences. In early 1936, we see another experiment in shaping discussions of topical issues with readers. This feature, styled as 'Dog Fights', seemed to conform to a stereotypical representation of the argumentative nature of the paper's working-class readership. Yet newspapers, especially in the era of targeting particular demographics based on education, political views and class, as encouraged by innovations such as the ABC, could never be accused of acting irresponsibly by stereotyping their audience. Commercially, it worked. This was later augmented by a similar regular feature entitled 'This week's argument'. In combination with this approach, Cassandra and other columnists often drew upon the letters and their no-holds-barred expression of views to provide biting social commentary that exposed the hypocrisies of the polite classes.

On 16 April 1936, we have an explicit commentary on the contents of the letters and some of the organizational issues surrounding the receipt of readers' correspondence from the editor of the letters pages under the headline:

Drama in the Post-Bag

I read letters — thousands of them every week from the British isles and all the world.

To the postman each one is just another letter for the *Daily Mirror*. But I read them.

Drama, humour, pathos — these are the ingredients of every batch. A wrecked life struggles to express itself in one smudgy note, the next is a joke [...].

Behind each one is a man or a woman with something to say. Often the letter is sent because the writer has no one else to whom he can unburden himself.

My mailbag is the safety-valve of thousands.

The Soldiers' Paper

The tabloid entered World War Two parading its credentials as a mouthpiece for the ordinary man and woman, stating on 13 September 1939 that 'we cannot endure fools in high places as we did after 1914' in direct reference to people's memories of the inadequacies of elite decision making that had, in popular memory and experience, unnecessarily cost so many lives in World War One. It was to adapt its popular appeal to draw readers into a discussion of the war that would remain patriotic but be critical of anything that was detrimental to the needs of the ordinary soldiers and their families at home. Harnessing humour, whenever possible it developed a crusade aimed at fighting men and the women left at home in 'the war to win the war', often articulated by left-wing journalists such as Tom Wintringham. It quickly became the 'paper of the rank-and-file, easy to read, uncomplicated in its politics. It was on the side of the underdog, and that meant, psychologically, almost everyone who had to take orders in war-time.'⁴⁶ This approach was immediately apparent in pieces such as:

45 *Daily Mirror* (12 January 1935), 10.

46 Edelman, pp. 141–42.

NO SNOB CLASS IN ARMY

The greatest break with tradition the Army has ever made was announced last night.

Class distinction will cease to play any part in the choice of officers. Every officer in future will be chosen wholly on his merit as a soldier and leader of men. Duke's son, cook's son will have to take exactly the same chance in the ranks.⁴⁷

Letters continued to be a prime focus for the paper's relationship with readers. Given that paper rationing in the war meant that only four to six pages could be used in the production of a daily newspaper, including the need to reserve a certain amount of space for news from the war and for public service and government announcements, the fact that the *Daily Mirror* still chose to prioritize readers' letters is a clear indication of an overall editorial strategy of engagement with its audience. This was not the case throughout the popular press, as the *Daily Express* eschewed letters in the main. While the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Herald* did feature letters, they were of a very different tone to those in the *Daily Mirror*, more politically dogmatic and less inclusive of readers' views.

Addressing the Popular Vote

By the launch of the General Election campaign that followed VE day, the *Daily Mirror's* approach was encapsulated in the adoption of a new slogan on its masthead from 11 May: 'FORWARD WITH THE PEOPLE.' Despite Churchill's heroic status immediately after the war, the memory of the pre-war policies and cruelties of the Conservatives were fresh in people's memories. The paper did much to rekindle these in a continuation of its epistolary strategy. Certain letters seemed to encapsulate suspicion of the landed classes in their attempts to pervert the intentions of the electorate while others articulated long-standing resentments about the hierarchies of need. The relationship that had been initiated in the 1934 relaunch was consummated with brilliant editorial insight into the motivations and aspirations of the readership that it had so assiduously courted over the previous decade. Letters started filling its pages with commentary on this regular feature from 1 June: 'still coming in', 'pouring in', 'continue to publish':

From now until the election we shall be publishing your letters about how you are going to vote and what you think of the parties you are voting for. Here are some letters from people who support [...].

Labour and Liberals⁴⁸

There were familiar cries for help and, in response, editorial linkage with perennial concerns about bureaucratic incompetence that disadvantaged ordinary voters:

Can't you please do anything to help me get my vote?

That is the cry which has been coming to me from many of you this week. And my answer has had to be 'I'm afraid I can't'.

But the really upsetting thing about these letters — and the reason why

47 *Daily Mirror* (14 October 1939), 3.

48 *Daily Mirror* (1 June 1945), 2.

I'm going to quote some of them now — is that many of you seem to be the victims of official bungling.⁴⁹

Amidst this epistolary campaign, one letter triggered a sustained electoral push. On 25 June, in a letter printed on the front page, a Mrs C. Gardiner from Ilford, Essex, concluded that, 'I shall vote for him.' The headline '*I'll vote for him*' with italics and underlining to emphasize its significance, became a slogan for the election and encapsulated many of the feelings of the working classes as the war came to an end. The letter highlighted that those fighting wanted to return to decent homes, fair wages, good education for children and rejected the inevitability of a return to the 'bad old days'. It may have been uncannily similar to a report by George McCarthy, a Chief Correspondent, in the newspaper on 13 June, under the headline 'Vote our way'; but nevertheless, the piece resonated with readers, and it prompted renewed energy in the campaign to return an alternative to the Conservatives. It adopted the author as Everywoman:

The 'Daily Mirror' believes that this letter expresses something more than the intention of one woman.

It offers wise advice to all women.

Conclusion

We can now return to the rhetoric of the popular as an expression of Williams's defining parameters. Having established itself as the champion of the underdog during the Spanish Civil War, the *Daily Mirror* championed the cause of the citizen-soldier in the Second World War and, throughout the mid-century, articulated the voice and concerns of a left-inclined, working-class readership. The *Daily Mirror* can claim to have established a distinctive identity within popular commercial print culture. Its boast that it represented the voice of the people — 'pugnaciously populist' — was powerfully captured in the letters it published and upon which it based much supplementary editorial and feature commentary.⁵⁰ It inverted, at least rhetorically and probably in some more material way, the top-down approach of existing, more overtly political popular newspapers such as the *Daily Herald*, *Daily Worker*, or *Reynolds's News*.

By the time it had reached the zenith of its circulation and influence in the mid-1960s, the paper was considered by Anthony J. P. Taylor as giving 'an indication as never before what ordinary people in the most ordinary sense were thinking. The English people at last found their voice.'⁵¹ Of course, not everyone is convinced by the integrity of this model of popular journalism, accusing it of being a 'simulacrum of popular journalism', while James Thomas has reservations about the political position of the paper beyond its rhetorical appeal.⁵² The *Daily Mirror*, while not quite living down to the initial worst suspicions of its own motivations, perhaps came closer to something far more enlightened than mere commercial success. In terms of defining its contribution to a popular culture that captured the essence of being seen from the point of view of the people themselves, as Williams imagines an authentic popular culture ought to be, it probably came as close to that authenticity as a commercial product ever could. In its way, it demonstrated how the popular press could combine democratic journalism,

49 *Daily Mirror* (18 June 1945), 7.

50 Harry Hopkins, *The New Look: A Social History of the Forties and Fifties* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1964), pp. 23–24.

51 Anthony J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914–1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 548–49.

52 Smith, p. 179; James Thomas, "A Cloak of Apathy": Political Disengagement, Popular Politics and the *Daily Mirror*, 1940–1945', *Journalism Studies*, 5 (2004), 469–82.

speaking on behalf of the ordinary, oft-ignored people, with a light-hearted touch redolent of the popular entertainment environment within which mass journalism sits.

Martin Conboy is Professor of Journalism History at the University of Sheffield where he is also the co-director of the Centre for the Study of Journalism and History. He is the author of ten books on the language and history of journalism, ten edited collections, has contributed widely to scholarly journals and is on the editorial boards of *Journalism Studies*, *Media History*, *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, and *Memory Studies*. An elected fellow of the *Royal Historical Society*, he has a particular interest in the history and contemporary manifestations of popular journalism as demonstrated by key publications: *The Press and Popular Culture* (2002), *Tabloid Century* (2015), and *Global Tabloid* (forthcoming 2021).

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