

Aspects of the study of media and newspaper history in the UK¹

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The study of media history, which can be seen as a branch of communications history, but with a firmer focus on forms of transmission, like film, the press and broadcasting emerged slowly in the UK after 1945 from a number of contexts including sociology, literary and cultural studies and history, and I want to make a few points about each of those areas before looking briefly the development of press history. In brief, I want to address the question 'How did the study of media, and in particular press history, arise in the UK in the 20th century?'

History and the Social Sciences.

In the UK media history emerged in the interface between history and the social sciences. In 1959 the American sociologist C. Wright Mills argued that: 'every social science—or better, every well considered social study—requires a historical scope of conception and full use of historical materials'. He was attacking trends in the study of sociology which had forgotten the fact that the founders of the area, notable Marx and Weber were grounded in history, and seemed to consist of efforts to restate and adopt philosophies of natural science so as to form a programme and canon for work in social science. These criticisms were also voiced in the UK. Writing in 1957 the historian

¹ The citations in this paper can be found in two articles I have published and which I draw heavily on in this paper. They are: 'Media History and Media Studies: aspects of the development of the study of media history in the UK 1945-2000', *Media History*, Vol.8, No.2, 2002: 155-173; and, 'History, Historians and the Writing of Print and Newspaper History in the UK, c.1945-1962', *Media History*. Vols18, Nos 3 & 4 (2012):289-310. The issue in which the second article was published was devoted to 'The Historiography of the Media in the United Kingdom'. Readers interested in these themes should consult these articles, as they are only touched on in this presentation.

A.J.P. Taylor considered 'sociology is history with the history left out'. The study of communications was associated with sociological approaches to method for many years, and as such, was looked down upon by historians.

Yet even, when in the 1960s Jurgen Habermas incorporated a historical approach to communications into his account of the public sphere, other social theorists of modernity, notably, Giddens, Mann, Foucault and Bourdieu gave 'relatively little direct and sustained consideration to the nature and impact of communication media in the modern world'. By the 1990s the relationship between the social sciences, in particular social theory and history, remained marked by disciplinary tensions, even though historians had long since moved in the direction of social history which was informed by social theory. Media History, because of its association with media studies in the UK, which was itself informed by social theory, was for many years, arguably neglected by the historical profession.

Media Studies in the UK

It was 'only in the 1920s—according to the Oxford English Dictionary—that most people began to speak of "the media"' but intellectual interest in mass communications goes back much further. In the UK there were widespread concerns about the spread of mass printed materials in the nineteenth century and the study of journalism history had developed in the UK by the middle years of the nineteenth century.

The development of audience research from the 1930s onwards 'sprang from an attempt on the part of organised communicators ... to discover facts about their audience either for marketing or for programming purposes or both'. In the UK the BBC began systematic audience research in the 1930s and the critical study of the press grew in vogue in the first 30 years of the century, culminating in the 'first empirical report on the British Press' in 1938 by the Political and Economic Planning group.

A major influence on the academic study of media, culture and media history in the UK was the work of tutors within the Workers Educational Association (WEA). In the 1930s and 1940s, the WEA, in which the economic historian R.H. Tawney and the émigré' sociologist Karl Mannheim were involved, brought together concerns about the relationship between 'popular culture', literature and sociology.

Historians like Asa Briggs played a key role in the WEA in the 1950s, acting as President from 1958 to 1967. As Michael Pickering has pointed out, in these years amongst those interested in culture 'history was widely accepted as a vibrant and critical source of new intellectual work'. The formative influence on early cultural studies was, however, English literary criticism, a tradition from which both Raymond Williams, author of *Culture and Society* and Richard Hoggart author of *The Uses of Literacy* came. Richard Hoggart has described how 'the methods of literary criticism ... close analysis, listening to a text, feeling a text and its texture' were applied to 'the study of popular culture; and not just the words but the images too'. Hoggart brought this approach with him to the University of Birmingham where, in 1964, he founded the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and where he hoped to maintain an interdisciplinary approach to the study of culture drawing on philosophy, literary criticism and history.

Empirical sociology and history played a role in the development of academic interest in media studies. Raymond Williams, in his books from the 1950s to the 1970s, 'continuously made reference to the past' although without displaying the 'methodological procedures of a trained historian'. His work was praised, none the less, in 1966, by the BBC's historian, Asa Briggs, as having 'detected whole new ways of thinking in terms of communications'. None the less, from the 1960s the growing influence of continental (French, German) critical theory within the New Left spilled over into media studies in the UK, side-lining history. So it was not surprising that when, in the 1970s and 1980s, as undergraduate courses on communications or cultural studies began to take a footing in UK polytechnics, theory occupied a privileged place.

By the 1980s and 1990s concerns about the theoreticism, lack of empirical methodologies and a-historicism of large areas of media studies were widespread. In a wide-ranging critique of media studies in higher education first published in 1981, Nicholas Garnham criticized the area's focus on 'ideology' as 'a-social and a-historical' and enjoined media studies to: 'forget notions of its own specificity and re-establish its links with the mainland of the social sciences, the queen of which is history in the robes of historical materialism'. In 1991 Curran believed that 'historical research' was 'the neglected grandparent of media studies'.

Media History

Just as social theorists in the twentieth century were slow to recognize the importance of communications and media in history so too were historians. As John Tosh has pointed out, for much of the twentieth century there remained in UK historical writing, a 'traditional empiricism and hostility to over conceptualised argument'. As professional history emerged in the twentieth century, it tended to downplay grand theory and stress the importance of detailed archival work, which prioritised empirical findings over broader speculations and which prioritized a particular type of political history, often constitutional in focus. Michael Bentley has called this modernist history.

The lack of focus on media history can also be attributed to more general ideas about the emergence of the mass media amongst elites in the UK. The social historian, G.M. Trevelyan writing in 1901 considered the printing press had been captured by 'Philistines'. Also history attracted those of a painstaking turn of mind, interested in fine detail, or, as the conservative historian G.R. Elton put it a 'concern with the particular'

Thus a number of factors had combined to discourage a wide ranging, theoretically informed style of history in the UK, and within that to discourage a detailed historical focus on the nature and significance of communications systems, particularly print and the press. The emergence of social

history in the UK, slowly at first in the 1950s, and more rapidly thereafter, helped to create a climate in which questions of communications and media history could develop.

By the 1960s and 1970s systematic work on the media, print and broadcasting included, was being undertaken by people in the UK, with an explicit commitment to using theory from the social sciences as well as with a concern for the particular. This took place within the context of an expansion in the foci of historical studies, which began to include historical studies of gender, class, race, social memory, literacy and culture.

None the less problems remained. Briggs has noted how he has: 'spent a great deal of my time and energy in writing the history of broadcasting ... sometimes to the express regret of several of my historian colleagues who have argued that I might have been better employed elsewhere'. This reflected, arguably, a continuing distance between historians and the status they accorded to the study of the media. In 1996 Nick Hiley argued that media history 'is still not accepted as a subject of enquiry in its own right'; historians, he stated 'tend to study, not the media themselves, but the events which they describe and illustrate'. There was a more urgent dimension to this lack of recognition: 'Until the mass media are established as a valid field for historical research— not for their contents or cultural impact, but for their own importance as an industry—the study of the media will remain in its present fragmented state, and the basic records will continue to be destroyed or sold overseas'. As late as 2000, the historian John Tosh was describing newspapers as mere 'sources' for political and social views, day to records of events. Understanding film and the press as part of evolving patterns of the circulation of meaning and articulation of social and cultural power in society does not figure in this approach.

By the 1990s, however, the foci of historical study in the UK had developed and historians were much more used to utilizing theory from a variety of sources and working on a much wider range of topics than had been the case up to the 1950s and 1960s. This provided the conditions in which media history developed in the UK, with more and more theses and books on the subject coming out

of history and literature departments, and specialist journals such as *Media History* and the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, publishing a wide range of work.

In retrospect the systematic historical work on the mass media in the UK developed from the late 1950s onwards across a number of established (history, sociology) and newer (media studies) areas of study. The dominance of literary, theoretically driven and often a-synchronic models of enquiry in media, cultural and communications studies contributed to the barriers that existed between these areas and history. Across these areas lay disputes about where the methodological emphasis should lay, either towards theory or more empirically orientated approaches. The slow recognition amongst historians of the issues associated with media history reflected the methodological conservatism of the profession. This began to breakdown in the 1950s and 1960s, but it has been, and remains, a slow process.

Newspaper history in the UK

I have just identified very broadly factors which both inhibited and favoured the growth of interest in media studies and media history in the twentieth century. But, illuminating as I hope that is, it is too broad an approach. We still lack fine grained accounts of the development of the study of media history. In order to illustrate this point, I want to devote the second part of my talk to pointing to just some of the complexities involved in the development of press history in the UK in the first half of the 20th century,

Under the influence of the forces I have described above, press history began to take off in the 1970s- with work by historians like James Curran, Alan Lee and Michael Harris, and, on a grander scale, but Elizabeth Eisenstein. In the UK context there was a sense that much of what had gone before had been too focused on theoretically naïve, grand narratives of the role of the press in the UK in struggling against licencing and in pedestrian accounts of the history of publications and particular journalists. As David Nord has pointed out, the 1960s and 1970s:

‘In journalism history and media history, a new generation of scholars ... criticised traditional histories of the media for being too insular, too decontextualized, too uncritical, too captive to the needs of professional training, and too enamoured of the biographies of men and media organisations’

There was much truth in this but this it was in many ways an oversimplification of developments to that point.

Firstly there were, of course, many very conventional approaches to press history in circulation prior to the 1970s. When distinguished historians used the press it was often in an unreflective manner. For example, writing in the 1950s J.A.G.Pocock’s account of the Restoration historian, Robert Brady (1627-1700) raised no question about the role of printing in his working life or intellectual universe. The issue of influence was left unexamined, more assumed than interrogated. Writing in 1959 about W.T.Stead’s articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette* entitled ‘The Maiden Tribute of Babylon’, which exposed the evils of child prostitution, Keith Thomas asserted, without any seeming justification, that they ‘made reform inevitable’. Print was frequently used as a source, often without any critical consideration of the provenance or wider role of the publications used. For example the pioneering local historian, W.G. Hoskins advised the use of nineteenth century local newspapers along with other sources as a way ‘of placing on record much information that exists only in the minds of the elderly and the aged’. And public opinion was also mined from the deposits of print. In spite of being more aware than many of his contemporaries of the complexities of the role of print and the press in society, Asa Briggs made use of newspapers as a source for ‘middle-class consciousness’ in English politics between 1780 and 1846 .

But almost at the same time different approaches were emerging. In the USA, in 1932 Robert Albion argued for the use of the concept of a Communications Revolution, on a par with the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions. A focus on canals, telegraphs, railroads, and cable was necessary to clarify the specific role of communications developments in modern history. In the UK Stanley Morison pressed

forward scholarship on printing and on newspapers, in particular with his book on *The English newspaper: some account of the physical development of journals printed in London between 1622 & the present day* (1932). In 1932 Q.D. Leavis not only asserted the cultural importance of studying popular fiction, but also pointed to the inadequacy of the treatment of the history of the periodical press. Thus, prior to World War II critically informed perspectives on the nature and importance of communications, print and newspapers were emerging on both sides of the Atlantic, offering approaches that would slowly develop and stimulate thinking.

In addition, writers in the 1950s were alert to the limitations of work in the area. In 1951, William Miller argued that publishing history was 'tiresomely anecdotal ... with scarcely a generalisation on the state or structure of the industry' and needed to see itself as part of the wider field of communications. In 1954, Stanley Morison argued that newspapers did not attract the research that might be expected in an age of mass newspaper readership. In England the study of newspapers had, until the 1930s 'been almost entirely restricted to bibliographers and one or two diplomatic historians' with the exception of Muddiman's *History of English Journalism to the foundation of the Gazette* (1908). The lack of good bibliographies had been one cause, as had the British Museum's 'absurd defect in system' which placed printed newspapers in the Department of Manuscripts. The problems of writing the history of print and newspapers were therefore recognised in the 1950s. Morison, a distinguished student of the subject, had a strong sense of the advances that had been made, as well as a desire to see the development of fuller accounts of print history, broader in focus and grounded in accurately compiled bibliographies.

During the 1950s and beyond a broader approach to the social and cultural dimensions of the press could also be found in the popular history weekly, *History Today*. At a time when much scholarly work was mired in empiricism, *History Today* did articles which saw the importance of the press in relation to topics such as political reform, dress reform, popular understandings of slavery, satirical prints, and the circulation of the meanings of novels across many media forms. None of this was

theoretically ground breaking, but it does show that the broader, more integrative approaches to press history that we strive for today, have origins that pre-date the growth of the field in the 1960s and 70s. .

Running parallel with this was work which evidenced a deeper, more empirically grounded and critically aware approach to the subject. In 1946 Folke Dahl's scholarly edition of *Dutch Corantos 1618-1650* was welcomed in the *English Historical Review* which stated that: 'It is not an exaggeration to say that this publication for the first time makes a really exact study of the newspaper possible'. Arthur Aspinall's 'Statistical accounts of the London newspapers in the eighteenth century' (1948) recognised that 'much research work remains to be done before a satisfactory history of the newspaper press in the eighteenth century can be written'. *The Library* was also publishing work developing knowledge about publishing. In 1951 L.G. Johnson published his findings on the authors of the anonymous reviews that appeared in the *Edinburgh Review*. The methodical collection and publication of essential information developed in the 1950s. In 1955 the journalist and economic historian A.P.Wadsworth published a detailed and subsequently much used description of newspaper circulations between 1800 and 1954. Other works with a broader focus emerged. In 1949 Aspinall published *Politics and the Press c.1780-1850*. Modernist in its use of manuscript sources, fact building and meticulous attention to detail, it 'reflected its author's preoccupation with contemporary evidence rather than impressionistic opinions'. In this scholarly work he gave a detailed account of the factors limiting the circulation of the press. These included technical difficulties in production, backwardness in communications, illiteracy, Post Office restrictions and the hostile attitudes of the governing class. They were overcome, in part, by reading rooms, reading societies, coffee and ale houses, and by the illegal practice of hiring newspapers, all ways in which a wider reading public could access print.

Works such as this were supplemented by writers on urban history such as Asa Briggs, W.H.G.Armytage and Donald Read, who gave the press a central position in their accounts of

change. Briggs' study of early eighteenth century Birmingham critiqued accounts of urban history which emphasised the formless and untrammelled individualism of the burgeoning, sprawling, ugly cities that sprung up with the industrial revolution.

A tradition closer to the concerns of literary history, but using methods of careful reconstruction and archival work favoured by historians, supplemented these developments in the 1950s. This was most strongly associated with writers like R.K.Webb, Richard Altick and Ian Watt. It deepened understanding of the nature of the reading public and of the contexts within which reading and the circulation of meanings took place. In 1950, Webb's work on working class readers in early Victorian England led him to challenge received views about low levels of literacy and the supposedly transformative impact of the 1870 Education Act on the growth of a reading public. The idea that levels of literacy were low through much of the Victorian era made 'the upsurge in cheap popular literature and the deep concern over it to some degree smoke without fire'. This was the 'street-literature – those productions devoted to crimes, executions, passion and scandal, which rarely leaves traces commensurate with their circulation'. The importance of Richard Altick's contribution to the development of approaches to print history is well established. Early in his career he realised that social history was an essential context for literary studies. He was familiar with, but not uncritical of, the work of G.M.Trevelyan, J.L. and Barbara Hammond and Q.D.Leavis. He developed an approach characterised by scholarly precision, the accumulation of dependable information on the subject, and a rejection of the cultural snobbery associated with the approaches pioneered by the Leavises. *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800-1900* (1957) provided a detailed account of the contexts shaping reading; the social background of readers, religion, utilitarianism, education, literacy, self-help traditions, mechanics' institutes, public libraries, the book trade, and the development of periodicals and newspapers. In rescuing the history of reading, and by implication print and newspapers, from the simplifications of earlier work, and bringing detailed scholarly attention to the facts to the subject, like Webb, he helped lay the foundations of the more grounded and wide ranging approaches which succeeded.

This sense of the complexity of print and its relations was not limited to political or urban historians, or literary scholars. Harold Perkin produced a sophisticated popular account of the origins of the popular press in 1957 drawing on the developments I have outlined. He attacked myths about illiteracy and the transformative influence of the 1870 Education Act and the Harmsworth Revolution. Drawing explicitly on R.K. Webb, Aspinall and Wadsworth, official statistics on education, survey histories and street ballads, Perkin sketched a convincing account of the popular press, puncturing ideas about its origins and its standards.

So by the end of the 1950s historians of the press and newspapers could draw on a considerable amount of work. It was orientated towards archives, focusing on accuracy and laying factual and critical foundations for later work. It varied in quality of insights, but it was a clear consolidation of an empirically grounded and forward looking approach to the subject. It clearly influenced further developments. One influential inheritor of these advances was Raymond Williams. His influence on writers of the social history of communications has been acknowledged and he contributed a chapter to the important Boyce, Curran and Wingate collection on newspaper history produced in 1978. His sense of the unity of culture and its interconnections was anthropological in its orientation, but echoed the insights of Briggs and Altick. His attacks on the myth of 1870 as a turning point in the history of literacy and the popular press appeared in 1958 in his book *Culture and Society* and in 1961 in *The Long Revolution* and, like his approach to the growth of the reading public and the popular press, rested, at least in those two seminal publications, on the insights described here and which were circulating in the 1950s.

Conclusion

In this short space of time I have tried to draw attention to two ways of answering the question, how did the study of media and in particular press history arise in the UK in the 20th century? The first way to answer this was, I have argued, to attend to broad developments in disciplines and thinking about history and society that ran across the first 70 years of the century; changes which saw a

growing awareness that the media needed close study and that to do that you needed both cultural and social theory and detailed empirical work. The second way to answer that question, I have argued, is to look in far more detail than we have to date at the type of work that was published on press history in the first 70 years of the century and see there work which displayed a variety of qualities; some conventional and unreflective about the press; some intuitive and imaginative about its dimensions and some, increasingly sophisticated work on press history. This helps us recognise as others have pointed out, that the emergence of new approaches to history always co-exist with established trends, and that moments, such as the 1970s which appear at first view to be watersheds, moments of real change, have roots that go far deeper.

Finally, in academia at least, establishing areas of study within institutions as centres for the study of say media history or press history is crucial to the development of history as a whole. The establishment and work of this centre here in Athens seems to me to be a wonderful example of how focused work within institutions can bring to national and international attention the importance of studying a relatively neglected field. When the history of the development of thinking and work about the history of the press in Europe and in Greece is written in the future, I am certain that the achievements of this centre will play a major role in that account.

Thank you for listening to me.