



‘Smiling Pictures Make People Smile’: Northcliffe’s journalism

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This essay is part of a broader argument about press barons that states that they were successful because of their ability to combine managerial and editorial skills. They stood out in the field of the press as investors, profit-makers and empire builders, and were also conspicuous for their outstanding degree of commitment to the newspapers they owned and distinguished themselves as editors of great experience and exceptional skill [1].

The essay develops the latter argument about the editorial side of press barons’ talent for newspaper ownership by giving an account of Northcliffe’s capabilities in journalism. It argues that Northcliffe was a newspaper proprietor of great journalistic skills—which is slightly different from saying that he was a great journalist. His place in history is due to his understanding of journalism as a press proprietor. It is his use and adaptation of journalism to the requirements of a modern newspaper that are so striking.

This claim entails that Northcliffe may be the founder of the modern newspaper, but certainly not the ‘founder of modern journalism’, as David English put it, and before him a long list of hagiographers [2]. Northcliffe applied, improved and developed journalistic techniques rather than devised new ones.

When Northcliffe first forayed into the daily press of the 1890s, British journalism had been developing for several decades. The repeal of the stamp duty in 1855 opened up the possibility to sell newspapers for a penny. This enlarged the market of readers, set circulations soaring and attracted newcomers to the field of the press [3]. Facing increased pressure under renewed competition, newspapers began to adapt their content to the changing economic circumstances. The new *Daily Telegraph*, for example, downplayed politics well before the *Daily Mail* reduced its parliamentary column to a couple of short paragraphs (see below) [4]. Years before the *Daily Mail* indulged its readers in more sensationalism than any previous daily newspaper with claims to at least a modicum of respectability, the *Daily Telegraph* sensationalized the writing of crime reports and scattered them around the paper [5].

In the 1880s, the London evening gazettes were the breeding ground of ‘New Journalism’ [6]. In these gazettes, journalists began to experiment with reportorial techniques, notably a lighter writing style, a vivid way of picturing reality, and the occasional sensational overtone, that were picked up later by the editorial team of the *Daily Mail*. As will be discussed later, Northcliffe was an insatiable press campaigner. This route, too, was first opened by New Journalism’s most forceful exponent, W.T. Stead. As editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* between 1883 and 1890 he indulged in many crusades during his editorship and developed a campaigning style that presaged that of the *Daily Mail* [7].

Most professional values and discursive norms specific to modern journalism developed prior to Northcliffe's arrival in the daily press. By the end of the nineteenth century, the distinction between truth and fiction was established, journalists were duly concerned about the 'accurate reporting of facts', and the claims to objectivity in reporting had gathered pace [8].

Newspapers had also begun to depart from party politics. By the 1880s, most newly established papers claimed to be apolitical, and one-third of all papers declared themselves to be free from political ties [9].

Northcliffe's contribution to the history of the press is not as a journalist but as a press owner who had an extraordinary understanding of the implications of journalism for the daily press. He applied and developed journalistic practices more than he invented them. He brought the daily newspaper into the twentieth century and modernized journalism in the process. Northcliffe had an impact on the history of journalism, first because he stretched journalism to new limits, but also because newspaper ownership had become a crucial element in the development of journalism.

This essay discusses Northcliffe's concept of journalism and reviews the key journalistic techniques he and his editorial teams employed. It is divided into three sections. The first section examines Northcliffe's philosophy of news. In the second section, two of the press baron's most oft-used discursive strategies, sensationalism and 'crusading' are explored. The third section proposes an explanation of Northcliffe's commercial success and suggests that it could be attributed to his journalistic skill combined with his constant effort to discern and respond to readers' tastes.

Northcliffe's Philosophy of News

Early in his career, and more acutely than most of his contemporaries, Northcliffe became aware of the importance of news in journalism and realized that news was one of the main selling points of newspapers. He expressed this view on countless occasions, in 1921 for example when he told his staff that the only way to bring up the *Daily Mail's* circulation to two million was 'by getting plenty of exclusive news, plenty of good pictures, good serial stories, and by intensive publishing' [10]. Northcliffe's journalism was news-based and information-oriented, which he blended in his newspapers with entertainment material and magazine features. He is on the record for saying that 'It is hard news which captures readers [...] and it is features which hold them' [11]. In accordance with that principle, one of his most consistent strategies was to ensure that his papers provided readers with a great quantity and a great variety of news.

With regard to the quantity of news, Northcliffe opted for the strategy of offering more news to readers than his competitors. To that effect he developed the news-gathering forces of the *Daily Mail*, and later of *The Times*, and ensured that his papers offered the best overall news coverage amongst London dailies. For instance, he expanded at great expense the coverage from the United States and the British Empire, and in the process forced his closest rivals to raise their standards in foreign coverage [12].

Northcliffe also improved the collating of information. Lucy Brown illustrates the press's casual way in handling information as late as 1895 with reports on gales throughout Europe in the winter of this year. She mentions that national newspapers did not collate reports on storms that resulted in over 400 lives lost on ships, and notices that 'it needed the imagination of a Northcliffe or a Stead to see the possibilities of such information' [13].

Finally, Northcliffe invested heavily in war reporting. The *Daily Mail* coverage of the

Boer War was extensive and he plunged greater sums than any of his competitors into the reporting of this conflict [14]. One of the early *Daily Mail*'s greatest coups was its scoop on the peace talks held at Vereening in 1902 [15].

Northcliffe had a singular aversion to being beaten by competitors in the field of news. First thing in the morning, the newspaper proprietor read the press and rang his editors to 'cross-examine [them] about the contents of the rival morning papers' [16]. Clarke, the editor of the *Daily Mail*, could learn over the phone 'whether [he] had won or lost the previous day in the incessant quest for "scoops"' [17]. But to reduce the risk of being scooped Northcliffe always gave his newspapers both the human and technical means to beat competitors in the daily news-hunt.

Concerning the variety of news, Northcliffe pursued a strategy that consisted of providing readers with information on a great range of topics. His *policy of diversity*, as this strategy may be called, was implemented in three different ways. The first was to reduce the amount of political reporting in his newspapers. Particularly conspicuous in this process of depoliticization was the reduction of the parliamentary column. By no means was the shortening of the parliamentary report an innovation by Northcliffe. Indeed, by the time he entered the field of the daily press, the *Daily Telegraph* had clearly established the trend for shorter accounts of parliamentary proceedings. Under the dynamic ownership of Edward Lawson, the *Daily Telegraph* was a commercially successful newspaper and could lay claim to the largest circulation in the country. To this end, the *Daily Telegraph* had published for some time considerably shorter parliamentary reports than those of *The Times*, by approximately two-thirds in 1865 [18].

Northcliffe applied the same technique to the *Daily Mail* but went much further. At its inception, the *Daily Mail* was conceived with the aim of containing less politics than any other general daily newspaper on the market. One of the first advertisements for the *Daily Mail* enticed readers to buy the paper promising that 'our leading articles, a page of Parliament, and columns of speeches will *not* be found in the *Daily Mail* on 4 May [1896], a halfpenny' [19]. Indeed, the *Daily Mail* kept parliamentary debates to a strict minimum, and the reports from Westminster rarely exceeded two short paragraphs. During its first month of existence, the average size of the *Daily Mail*'s parliamentary column was seven lines for the Lords, and eight for the Commons. These proportions remained the same until the beginning of the century, when the *Daily Mail* ceased to report the debates on a daily basis. Henceforth, summaries appeared sporadically.

Northcliffe avoided politics in the paper he launched, and depoliticized those he acquired. To the editorial staff of *The Times*, he asked for more topicality, more 'readability', lighter contents, and 'fewer and shorter articles on politics' [20]. A telegram read: 'Humbly beg for a light leading article daily until I return—Chief' [21]. Similarly, when Northcliffe bought the *Observer*, in 1908, he was aiming for a circulation of 40,000. Thus he exhorted James Garvin, its editor, to 'interest more people' and to avoid 'heavy politics', since politics, as Northcliffe put it, 'will prevent your getting circulation' [22]. With him, politics lost its privileged position and became a topic competing for space among many others. 'We must not let politics dominate the paper', he said to an editor of the *Daily Mail*; '[t]reat politics as you treat all other news—on its merits. It has no "divine right" on newspaper space' [23].

Alongside the reduction of the amount of politics in his papers, Northcliffe expanded the range of newspaper topics. He developed specialized news and improved the coverage of topics such as agriculture, transport, new technologies, sports, fashion,

leisure activities and entertainment. Society news and an interest in the rich and famous had been popularized by O'Connor's *Star* in the late 1880s, and the *Daily Mail* took the genre a bit further by publishing the diaries of famous people (e.g. *Daily Mail*, 2 February 1900). The *Daily Mail* was also filled with snippets on an incalculable number of events of little importance, but which Northcliffe and his editors deemed of interest to *Daily Mail*'s readers. In the 1890s, few dailies would have published stories on the illness of three bishops or the health of the Indian army, as the *Daily Mail* did on 8 February 1898. Northcliffe's aim, as he repeatedly explained to his staff, was that his newspapers should 'touch life at as many points as possible' [24]. As a result, the press magnate's newspapers explored new territories and reported aspects of personal and social life previously unrecorded in the daily press.

The policy of diversity is clearly reflected in two representative pages of the *Daily Mirror* on 13 October 1908, which contained no less than 33 news items. Readers were entertained with the divorce of the Earl of Yarmouth, the opening of a school of orators by an anti-socialist union, the charge of cruelty to a cat brought against a lieutenant-colonel by the Humanitarian League, the story of a woman killed to save her dog from a motor car, a romance between an Italian Duke and an American lady, the death of Ireland's alleged oldest inhabitant, a taxicab dispute, a balloon race accident, the journey of the King to Newmarket and a British warship's movements off the coast of Spain.

With this policy, Northcliffe was applying to the daily press one of the techniques he had learnt with his magazine publishing business. *Answers*, an imitation of Newnes's *Tit-Bits* launched in 1888, was entirely made of snippets of information on a great variety of topics susceptible to be of interest to readers.

Finally, Northcliffe's philosophy of news was embedded in his resolutely modern approach to newspaper publishing. He adopted the reader's point of view to his papers and thought that, above all, papers should captivate the readers. To him, a newspaper should not merely inform but also amuse and entertain. This implied a significant broadening of the traditional understanding of the role of the newspaper. By the time Northcliffe was publishing daily newspapers, the notion of newspapers as organs of opinion had been receding for several decades [25]. However, it was still common understanding that a daily newspaper should primarily be an organ of information centred on public affairs. Northcliffe was among those who contributed to a change of attitude in this matter, and, by the Edwardian decade, most proprietors and editors of popular and mid-market newspapers, such as the *Evening News*, *Star*, *Daily Express* and *Daily Dispatch*, were anxious to strike a balance between entertainment and information [26].

Northcliffe's definition of news clearly conveyed his concept of the ideal newspaper. He was not the author, as often implied, of the legendary 'when a dog bites a man, that's not news; but when a man bites a dog, that's news' [27]. However, he entirely subscribed to this adage, which he himself attributed to Charles Dana, and he insisted that '[i]n the *Daily Mail* we paid little or no attention to the dogs which bit men—and the dogs didn't like it—I mean the politicians, the bigwigs, the people who laid foundation-stones and presided at banquets and opened Church bazaars' [28]. In line with the American adage, Northcliffe defined news as 'anything out of the ordinary', adding that this is 'the only thing that will sell a newspaper' [29]. The same concept of news prevailed in his request to the editor of the *Daily Mail* to '[m]ake the paper a happy one, fresh and free from dullness' [30]. He was more specific concerning the main news page, which he called the 'surprise page' [31]. There, editors had to 'get more news and

more varieties of news', to create 'contrast' (the 'salt of journalism'), and to 'catch the reader's eye' with short articles and distinctive headings [32].

The success of the *Daily Mail* forced other proprietors to adapt the content of their newspapers and follow suit, even though they owned newspapers for purposes that were other than purely commercial. This was notably the case of the *Daily News*. In 1919, although the Cadbury family was anxious to propagate their Liberal creed through this newspaper, George Cadbury had to ask the editor, A.G. Gardiner, to drastically reduce the parliamentary report and the religious column. In subsequent letters, Cadbury suggested to Gardiner the introduction of features which proved popular in the *Daily Mail*, such as pictures, arguing that they had allowed Northcliffe's flagship paper to 'capture it [the *Daily News*'s circulation] by having pictures every day on the back' [33]. Neither of the two wanted these changes (Gardiner finally resigned in 1921), but pressure from rival newspapers, most notably the *Daily Mail*, had deemed them long overdue.

Sensational News and Press Campaigns

Northcliffe resorted to at least two methods to add elements of surprise and excitement to his newspapers: sensational news and the newspaper crusade. His biographers often report that he despised vulgarity and the use of sex-related news items in his newspapers [34]. Indeed, Northcliffe, unlike William Randolph Hearst, was not a natural sensationalist. However, evidence suggests that many of Northcliffe's daily newspapers, notably the *Evening News*, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Mail* published a fair amount of sensational material in their columns.

This essay argues that sensational material, as a news category, cannot be confined to sex-related items and the report of crimes and murders. It suggests an encompassing definition of sensational material that includes the news selection and coverage of two sorts of events. The first are those which present an extraordinary character. They comprise happenings which are unusual, rare and infrequent; those which are bizarre and uncanny—this includes the coverage of unexplained phenomena [35]; events which are atypical and abnormal; and events of a violent nature.

Examples of such events include natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes; accidents, such as steamship explosions, railways tragedies and fires; novelties such as technological innovations and weather records; unusual forms of behaviour such as acts of heroism; alleged supernatural phenomena, miraculous healings and tales of exorcism and spiritualism.

The second type of sensational material is crime news, it being understood that all crime coverage is not necessarily sensationalized.

Northcliffe's editors in the *Evening News*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Mirror*, kept an eye for these events and printed a considerable amount of news about such occurrences. In the early copies of the *Daily Mail*, the less sensational and most up-market of all three papers, the police and law court reports occupied a half-page to a page. Moreover, much space in the main news pages was devoted to news that was sensational. Page two of the issue of 11 May 1896, for example, included the following articles: 'A Spanish Lady's Death in Pimlico'; 'Death From Excitement'; 'Murder near Matlock: An Unaccountable Crime'; 'Extraordinary Scare at Forest Hill'; 'Corpse in a Burning House'; 'Ghastly Scene in Camberwell'.

Sensational news pervaded most sections of the paper, including the foreign news page. On 18 May 1896, page five of the *Daily Mail* read, *in extenso*: 'Texas Tornado: Two Hundred Lives Lost: Enormous Damage'; at Bida: 'Terrible Explosion: Two

Hundred People Killed'; 'Fire in Glasgow: Exciting Scenes'; 'Rioting in Paris'; 'Zola on the Jews'; 'Brigandage in Italy'; 'Distress in Italy'; 'The Cholera in Egypt'; 'Tribal Fighting at Berbier'; 'Germans in Africa: Sensational Story'; 'The Transvaal: Suicide of a Prisoner'. Once the paper had established its position in the market, it did indeed become more respectable, although Northcliffe himself once underlined the danger for the *Daily Mail* of becoming 'too respectable' [36].

Although these news items were not necessarily sensationalized in their treatment, the news selection of the *Daily Mail* reveals a clear liking for the exceptional and the uncanny. But the writing style of many stories testified to the intention of stirring readers' emotions. When 21 miners remained trapped down a mine for several days, their experience was 'terrible', their 'fight for life' 'desperate', their narrative 'thrilling', their meeting with the rescue team 'dramatic', their escape 'miraculous', their emotions 'indescribable', and the suspense 'dreadful' (*Daily Mail*, 31 March 1906).

The sensationalism of the *Daily Mirror* probably surpassed that of its sister paper. Many news stories were given a sensational spin, and in many cases the selected angle deliberately emphasized the most dramatic elements. When a young woman was found mutilated on a railway line, the *Daily Mirror* ran a series of articles on the 'murder or suicide' theme (22 February 1904). The police news section was entitled 'Law, Police, and Mystery'.

In both journals, the pathos that many news stories tried to convey was also blatant. Stories such as 'Heroic Mother's Futile Battle with the Flames' or 'Child Pathetic Story of her Mother's Suicide' were balanced with happy-ending tales (*Daily Mail*, 1 September 1904, 1 October 1904). The *Daily Mirror* applauded the 'act of splendid heroism' of a boy who rescued a lifeboat crew and the 'heroic midshipman' who saved ten lives (4 October 1910, 15 October 1910).

The sensationalist policy of Northcliffe's papers was also apparent in the prominence they gave to sensational events. The *Daily Mirror's* front page was progressively given over to dramatic happenings and was regularly devoted to full-page illustrations of murders, crimes, suicides and society scandals. Events selected for their dramatic qualities over more mundane news items were given much newspaper space and became media events. During the trial of Dr Crippen, condemned to death for the murder of his wife, the *Daily Mirror* published some 12 pages of news and comments within three days (18–20 October 1910). The trial was lavishly illustrated with 35 pictures splashed on the front and centre pages. All three issues were suffused with the sombre atmosphere of the hearings.

The crusade was another means by which Northcliffe made his papers more vivacious. A crusade may be defined as *a campaign launched by a newspaper to call for action or reform*. Campaigns differ in style and purpose. Between the 1880s and 1920s, three archetypal crusades may be identified in the British press. First came the *social crusade*, or press campaigns that called for reforms on issues such as poverty and child abuse. The second type, the *jingo crusade*, was also developed in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. These campaigns had nationalistic and imperial overtones and many called for action about deficiencies and problems related to national security and British army operations overseas. Northcliffe was chiefly responsible for the development of the third type of campaign, the *stunt*. These crusades were the most entertaining type and included calls for action on issues of minor importance. They also possessed an unmistakable journalistic element.

W.T. Stead was among the first to develop a campaigning journalistic style. He made a consistent use of the crusade, particularly those of the first two kinds. Soon after he

became editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1883 he wrote a series of indignant articles protesting against the living conditions of the deprived in the slums of London's poorest boroughs. The next year he launched campaigns for General Gordon to be sent to the Sudan and in support of a bigger and better Navy. In 1885 he demanded closer imperial ties. That year, he also launched his most famous campaign, the 'Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon'. In this series of articles, Stead described the evils of juvenile prostitution in London brothels and called for legislation protecting girls below the age of 16.

Northcliffe's use of the crusade was more frequent and on several occasions more blatantly commercial than Stead's. The style was aggressive, abrupt, and most of his campaigns were short-lived. None the less, several of his campaigns had a social dimension, notably his calls for purer milk, better housing and wholemeal bread, which was also a crusade for a healthier nutrition for children. Others were pure stunts, such as his calls for a new hat shape (the *Daily Mail Hat*), better roses, and bigger sweet peas.

Northcliffe's most prominent crusades were those he conducted along nationalistic and imperialist lines. Since its launch in May 1896, the *Daily Mail* embraced the imperialist cause and called itself the 'Voice of the Empire'. This stance was aptly epitomized by Kennedy Jones, Northcliffe's associate: 'It was the policy on which we worked through the whole of my journalistic career—One Flag, One Empire, One Home' [37].

From the early days of Anglo-German antagonism until the 1919 Versailles peace conference, Northcliffe ceaselessly crusaded on jingoistic themes. For many years before the outbreak of the First World War he warned against Germany, demanded a greater defence budget (already substantial), called for rearmament and for the reorganization of the armed forces.

Many contemporaries found Northcliffe's papers too jingoistic and bellicose, to the point that some journalists, such as J.A. Spender, editor of the Liberal *Westminster Gazette*, claimed that the press magnate bore some of the responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities [38]. This argument, presumptuous of journalistic power, reflected the contrast between the frenzy of the Northcliffe press and the pre-war hesitations of the Asquith cabinet [39].

During the war, the *Daily Mail's* crusades had a different purpose. They targeted the government's mismanagement of the conflict and were akin to calls for social reforms, but translated to war-related issues. In May 1915, Northcliffe heavily criticized Lord Kitchener, the Secretary for War, to whom he attributed the shortage of high-explosive shells. A couple of months before this outcry, Northcliffe had himself called for Kitchener's appointment, a paradox he acknowledged [40]. Later, even though he had joined the government as head of the British War Mission in the United States, he campaigned for compulsory conscription, the creation of a ministry of munitions and the Allied War Council.

Why crusade? Was it commercial motivation or strength of conviction that urged Northcliffe to embark on these numerous campaigns? Biographers generally point out that Northcliffe was not a cynical character and felt quite strongly about the campaigns he conducted. On the other hand, personal convictions and commercial interest are not necessarily incompatible, and evidence shows that circulation can tremendously benefit from crusading.

As to stunt campaigns, at least they had no other purpose but to attract the attention of the reading public to the paper and induce them to talk about it. Even before his first foray into the daily press, Northcliffe had long held the conviction that, to sell successfully, a publication needs to attract attention. While still in the magazine business,

he quickly realized that competitions and publicity schemes were about the only way to beat rivals and boost the circulations of his magazines [41]. Once involved in the daily press, crusades were one of the editorial means he used to achieve this objective [42].

As a general rule, campaigns gave him the opportunity to make newspapers more exciting reading material. Much of his thinking on journalism revolved around the necessity to produce vivacious copy [43]. Concentrating on selected popular topics allowed him to add thrills to the day's issue. For example, he launched the 'sweet peas stunt' in 1911 with the explicit intention of diverting the public from a tense domestic political situation, that had lasted too long for his taste and that 'made today's paper look too much like yesterday's' [44]. He had complained to Marlowe, the *Daily Mail* editor, that they had got 'into a groove' and that the 'leading articles are like gramophone records' [45].

In the case of jingoism, it can be observed that this was one of the most commercially viable stances the press lord could adopt. An inherent problem for mass circulation newspapers is that, as the readership multiplies, it becomes increasingly difficult for the editorial board to avoid a divisive editorial line. Northcliffe knew that partisan politics was a hindrance to the commercial prosperity of his newspapers and that a too partisan position in politics would alienate a large number of readers. Jingoism offered to the newspaper proprietor the possibility to voice a relatively safe political opinion and to transcend, as far as possible, the political divisions of the vast market of readers. Cynical as this argument may sound, Kennedy Jones showed in 1919 a line of reasoning not far different:

It has been overlooked in Fleet Street how largely the British Empire is a family affair; that there is hardly a household or a family circle of any size which does not have one or more of its members earning a livelihood somewhere in the outer wards. Letters come home, perhaps irregularly, but telling just enough to awaken curiosity in the regions they refer to. The instant we lifted the Jameson raid out of the miasmal fog of party politics and put it in the clear light of reason and honourable motive the heartiest support was accorded to our paper by all classes. [46]

Northcliffe may have never articulated these thoughts and may not have been fully aware of the commercial viability of jingoism in journalism. There is no doubt that he was a genuine patriot and imperialist, and that his newspapers' policy reflected his most sincere beliefs and opinions in that matter. But whether they were instinct, calculation or sheer good fortune, these beliefs were commercially sound. The above quotation shows that this coincidence had not been lost sight of by everybody in Northcliffe's editorial team.

Although Northcliffe's jingoism proved excessive for many of his Liberal contemporaries, nationalism allowed him to be vehement and uncompromising on some political issues, without directly hurting the group or class interests of an important section of readers. Jingoism, in other words, brought the profits of resolute and determined political opinions without the commercial risks that such positions often imply.

It is significant that three out of the four greatest crusaders of the time were press magnates who were supremely successful in raising circulations. Northcliffe, and, in the United States, Pulitzer and Hearst, were at the same time the most ardent crusaders and the most gifted and enterprising press owners [47]. The fourth, who never achieved great circulation, was Stead. In the 1890s, Pulitzer's *World* carried on frequent campaigns, which were as ephemeral as they were emotional, calling for action to alleviate the plight of the poor and oppressed in New York [48]. Similar to Northcliffe's stance

on imperialism, the New York *World* and Hearst's *Journal* adopted such a jingoistic stance during the Cuban crisis in 1896 that they remained for long one of the most oft-quoted causes for the intervention of the United States in the conflict with Spain in April of that year [49].

Northcliffe and the Reader's Mind

Are these journalistic abilities enough to explain Northcliffe's success as a newspaper proprietor? His accomplishment is best explained by the combination of his profound understanding of the fundamentals of journalism and his extraordinary capacity for perceiving the needs of each reading market.

There are many references in biographies to Northcliffe's life-long quest to satisfy the public's tastes. Widely regarded as a master of crowd psychology, he delivered lectures on many occasions to his fellow journalists on how to please the masses:

The things [Northcliffe says] people talk about are news—and what do they mostly talk about? Other people, their failures and successes, their joys and sorrows, their money and their food and their peccadilloes. Get more names in the paper—the more aristocratic the better, if there is a news story round them. You know the public is more interested in duchesses than servant-girls. [...] Ask the Amalgamated Press [Northcliffe's periodicals concern] whether they do better in Lancashire with serial or periodicals stories of factory life, or stories of high life. Everyone likes reading about people in better circumstances than his or her own. [50]

One of the many significant elements this abstract reveals is Northcliffe's striving to design a newspaper *around* readers' tastes. The same feature is clear in his correspondence with staff. Many of his communications with his managers dealt with the problem of identifying the needs of various publics and the ways to satisfy them.

J.H. Lingard was *Daily Mail* circulation manager from 1904 until 1919. At Northcliffe's request, he detailed in a memo the reasons why the *Weekly Dispatch* 'still does not satisfy the Sunday reader'. One of his recommendations concerned the editorial department, which Lingard asked 'to take care that the contents of the paper satisfy the requirements of the reader' [51].

Lingard's successor showed the same enthusiasm. In a memo to Northcliffe, Valentine Smith explained:

I know Leernock will also get up special stunts for me, but what I want to impress upon you is that it is no use our competing with the *Mirror* or *Sketch* with small pictures when they are given whole pages—we are wasting our money and doing ourselves no good by advertising. [...] I know the difficulties of space, but what I do not think the Editorial yet realize is the importance of these big local features, such as pageants, shows, regattas, etc.

I am confident that our sole chance of getting more sale of the *Mail* is by producing several slip editions every night with good pictures and large ones, therefore certain news will have to be sacrificed. I know it is a sad thing when the general public want paltry pictures, but they do—evidenced by sale of the picture papers—and unless we give them what they want we shall not progress as we ought'. [52]

Countless letters discussed this topic and related technicalities (such as train schedules and printing problems) and they show that reading the public mind was one of

Northcliffe's major preoccupations. His quote in Clarke's diaries shows Northcliffe identifying a need for escapism among the popular audience and his willingness to respond to this desire with more society news and celebrity gossip.

The care and professionalism Northcliffe brought to his marketing strategy is further illustrated in the successful pricing of the *Daily Mail*. When Northcliffe launched the paper in May 1896, he deliberately presented it as a traditional penny paper, but sold it for half that price. One of the ears of the paper read 'A Penny Newspaper for One Halfpenny'. This pricing strategy was one of the key factors in its success. Had Northcliffe designed the *Daily Mail* as a halfpenny paper, and sold it for that price, its fate might not have been the same [53].

Finally, Northcliffe proved his grasp of a market's needs by his ability to deal with different types of readership. With the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Mirror* and, eventually, *The Times*, he provided reading matter for every social class in Great Britain. He was not the only press proprietor to control different types of newspapers, of course, but he was the most successful in creating and maintaining newspapers for every branch of the reading public.

Conclusion

What Northcliffe succeeded in doing was to bring together on a new scale the production and the consumption sides of journalism. He had the ability to tailor each of his journalistic products to the specific needs of the different markets in which he was operating. When editing a paper, designing a stunt or writing a leading article, he was able to anticipate the reaction of the public to his material. He also correctly guessed the acceptable price of a modern daily newspaper, and he delivered the right amount of news, features and gossip readers expected for a half-penny. Northcliffe was good at delivering the content and packaging it right.

It takes both qualities to become a press magnate. Northcliffe's brother Harold, Lord Rothermere, lacked comparable skill and interest in journalism. He is thus precluded from belonging to this exclusively defined club, despite his peerage, his inheritance of Northcliffe's empire and his alleged business acumen. When Rothermere picked up the reins, the verdict was ruthless: the *Daily Mail* surrendered its supremacy to Beaverbrook's *Daily Express*. Rothermere's third son, Esmond, who inherited the remains of the business on his father's death in Bermuda during the Second World War, was no more successful. In 1971, three decades of mismanagement and strategic mistakes finally took their toll. Just before retiring, Esmond Rothermere was negotiating the take-over of his conglomerate by Sir Max Aitken, heir of the Beaverbrook empire [54]. The fate of the two Rothermeres (and of Max Aitken, indeed) shows that newspapers are not as easily inherited as land or peerages. Their conduct requires a strong commitment to content and journalistic talent, and nothing illustrates this better than Northcliffe's career.

Northcliffe's insight into journalism may not have been shared throughout his family, but its benefits were felt further afield. In 1920, he was advising a friend whom he had met during the Great War and who edited the Melbourne *Herald*. His letters included the following tips:

The first editorial should be the second thing read every day, the first being the main news ... Smiling pictures make people smile ... I, personally, prefer short leading articles ... People like to read about profiteering. Most of them would like to be profiteers themselves, and would if they had the chance ... Every

woman in the world would read about artificial pearls ... columns of items a day give the reader a great feeling of satisfaction with his three-penny worth ... My young men say you don't have enough stockings in the paper. I am afraid that I am no longer judge of that'. [55]

The subsequent gratitude of Keith Murdoch, the recipient of this letter and of many others, points to us that Northcliffe's guidance was instrumental in helping him establish his newspaper business. However, there is one word of advice which later generations may feel he did not pass on to his son, Rupert: 'Sport can be overdone, I believe, even in Australia' [56].

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- [1] J. Chalaby, "No Ordinary Press Owners: press barons as a Weberian ideal type", *Media, Culture & Society*, 19(4) (1997), 621–41.
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 - [4] L. Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 246–48.
 - [5] J. Chalaby, *The Invention of Journalism* (Basingstoke and New York: Macmillan, 1998), 155–59.
 - [6] See J.O. Baylen, "The 'New Journalism' in Late Victorian Britain", *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 18 (December 1972), 367–85; B.I. Diamond, 'A Precursor of the New Journalism: Frederick Greenwood of the *Pall Mall Gazette*', in J.H. Wiener, ed., *Papers for the Millions* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988), 25–45.
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 - [9] A.J. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press in England, 1855–1914*, 229.
 - [10] In H. Fyfe, *Northcliffe: an intimate biography* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1930), 270.
 - [11] In D. English, "Legend of 'The Chief'", 7.
 - [12] M. Engel, *Tickle the Public* (London: Hutchinson, 1996), 63, 75.
 - [13] L. Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers*, 254.
 - [14] S.J. Taylor, *The Great Outsiders: Northcliffe, Rothermere and the Daily Mail* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1996), 55–72.
 - [15] M. Engel, *Tickle the Public*, 76–78.
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 - [17] *Ibid.*, 126.
 - [18] L. Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers*, 246.
 - [19] In S.J. Taylor, *The Great Outsiders*, 32.
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 - [24] In H. Fyfe, *Northcliffe: an intimate biography*, 286.
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 - [26] J. Chalaby, *The Invention of Journalism*, 168–69.

- [27] Attributed to Amos Cummings, one of Charles Dana's editors, W. Breed, *The Newspaperman, News and Society* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 254.
- [28] In Fyfe, *Northcliffe: an intimate biography*, 86–87.
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- [30] In T. Clarke, *My Northcliffe Diary*, 197.
- [31] In T. Clarke, *Northcliffe in History* (London: Hutchinson, 1950), 181.
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- [35] J.W. Carey, 'The Dark Continent of American Journalism', in R.K. Manoff and M. Schudson, eds., *Reading the News* (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 168.
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- [37] K. Jones, *Fleet Street & Downing Street* (London: Hutchinson, 1919), 150.
- [38] J.A. Spender, *The Public Life*, vol. 2 (London: Cassell, 1925), 140.
- [39] P. Kennedy, *The Rise of the Anglo-American Antagonism* (London: Ashfield Press, 1980), 384.; see also N. Angell, *The Press and the Organization of Society* (London: Labour Publishing Company, 1922).
- [40] R. Pound and G. Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, 477. This crusade against a national idol he himself contributed to manufacturing is the only one that cost readers to Northcliffe, *ibid.*, 479.
- [41] *Ibid.*, 65–190.
- [42] See H. Fyfe, *Northcliffe: an intimate biography*, 44–47.
- [43] See, for example, T. Clarke, *My Northcliffe Diary*, 181–213.
- [44] R. Pound and G. Harmsworth, *Northcliffe*, 404.
- [45] *Ibid.*, 404.
- [46] K. Jones, *Fleet Street & Downing Street*, 146.
- [47] On Pulitzer see G. Juergens, *Joseph Pulitzer and the New York World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966); on Hearst see W.A. Swanberg, *Citizen Hearst* (London: Longman, 1962).
- [48] G. Juergens, *Joseph Pulitzer and the New York World*, 263–330.
- [49] J.E. Wisan, *The Cuban Crisis as Reflected in the New York Press* (New York, 1934); W.A. Swanberg, *Citizen Hearst*, 101–69.
- [50] In T. Clarke, *My Northcliffe Diary*, 200–201.
- [51] J.H. Lingard to A. Harmsworth, 16 November 1905, Northcliffe Papers, British Library, Add. MSS 62 211.
- [52] V. Smith to Northcliffe, 6 August 1913, Northcliffe Papers, British Library, Add. MSS 62 211.
- [53] Not to mention the failed attempt of Sir George Newnes to sell a half-penny newspaper for a penny. A month before the launch of the *Daily Mail*, Newnes started the *Daily Courier*. Although Newnes's paper suffered from some notable editorial weaknesses, it would have undoubtedly survived longer than five months provided its owner had realized that the penny charge was too high for the low middle-class market the paper was aiming at.
- [54] S.J. Taylor, *The Reluctant Press Lord* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1998), 201–205.
- [55] In S.J. Taylor, *The Great Outsiders*, 204–205.
- [56] *Ibid.*, 205.