
Reviewed by Elliot King (Loyola University)

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Commissioned by Zef Segal (Department of History, Philosophy, and Jewish Studies, the Open University of Israel)

Over the past several years, journalism historians have explored what is called transnational history. In what might be seen as a corollary to Benedict Anderson’s insight that newspapers and other media often play a central role in the development of community—a sense that people have common bonds even if they don’t know each other—transnational journalism history posits that journalism has never been just a local or national enterprise, but an international one shaped by global influences and transnational factors.

Although firmly anchored in British press history, Christopher Shoop-Worrall’s research monograph *Election Politics and the Mass Press in Long Edwardian Britain* provides indirect, but intriguing evidence of the need for a transnational lens to understand the history of journalism more fully. In this relatively short, ninety-nine-page study (not including appendices), Shoop-Worrall explores the intersection between a new generation of newspapers launched in Great Britain from 1896 to 1914 and the British political establishment. The so-called long Edwardian period in British politics, named for the monarch for most of that time, was marked by a shift in political dominance from the Conservative Party (then called Unionists) to the Liberal Party, which won its greatest electoral victory in history in 1906. The victory reflected, in part, the increased participation of working people in electoral politics and the growing strength of the trade union movement. In 1903, the Labour Party entered into an electoral pact with the Liberals that lasted until after World War I. The period also witnessed the eruption of the Boer war, and the heightened tension with Germany that ultimately led to the World War I.

In the period, a new kind of newspaper was launched, called “New Journalism”. One of the then current “high priests” of high culture, Matthew Arnold, denounced it as “feather brained,” of low quality and having a deleterious effect on British culture and standards. The New Journalism cultivated a mass audience through a focus on crime, the grotesque, sports, popular music hall
culture, and leisure activities—that is, the social and cultural interests of the working and lower-middle classes. Probably not coincidentally, at the same time, a new class of newspapers was emerging in the United States that critics also denounced as being of poor quality and injurious to American cultural standards. Those newspapers were labeled as “yellow journalism.” The social, cultural, and economic shifts underway in the industrialized world, at least in the English-speaking slice of the industrialized world, had opened up a new space for journalism, which mass newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean filled, much to the horror of many in the old-guard establishment.

Of course, both the British New Journalism and the American yellow journalism were wildly popular with the mass public, which was playing an ever more important role in electoral politics. Though limited in scope, the electoral reforms enacted in Great Britain in the 1880s had doubled the size of the British electorate, many of whom were poorer citizens. Moreover, it shifted electoral power to the urban centers where these new newspapers were most widely circulated, forcing political parties to appeal to lower-middle and working-class voters in a more consistent and sustained way.

In three substantive chapters, Shoop-Worrall examines the interplay between three new dailies launched at the time—the Daily Mail, the Daily Express, and the Daily Mirror—and the electoral politics and political parties during three national elections in the long Edwardian period. Chapter 2 takes a close look at the way politics and specifically elections were represented in the pages of these new dailies. Chapter 3 homes in on the idea that the way elections in the new dailies were presented blurred the lines between political news and the human interest stories that largely drove the newspapers’ popularity. And chapter 5 examines how the political parties reacted and responded to the new avenues of political and campaign communication created by the new dailies.

Each of the chapters is filled with intriguing insights and tantalizing perspectives. According to Shoop-Worrall, the new dailies represented the election contests predominately through two different frames. On the one hand, the elections were contextualized using the language of war, military campaigns, and battlefields. The use of the metaphor of war for political campaigning was particularly pronounced in 1900, when Britain was also engaged in the Second Boer War, but continued in the subsequent elections albeit to a lesser degree. In 1906, for example, when a former colonial secretary went down in defeat in the parliamentary elections, he was described as a “causality,” who had been “killed” by his policies.

The second dominant frame for electoral reporting was the transformation of the political parties into metaphorical visual representations coupled with barometers depicting the elections as “contests” or “races” with one side or the other pulling into the lead. This approach to coverage, according to Shoop-Worrall, enabled the newspapers to imbue the elections with their own drama and storylines. In short, elections were portrayed in much the same way other elements of popular culture were reported. The newspapers even sponsored large-scale gatherings to promote their election coverage. They ran contests in which viewers could win prizes if they accurately predicted the election outcome. Horse-race-like political coverage was a thing 125 years ago.

But the framing of elections as war or popular culture is only one side of the story, according to Shoop-Worrall. The elections were made to appear as an integral feature of readers’ everyday lives. Elections became routine activities. Election motifs were used to advertise household products. Campaign issues were incorporated into advertising. Electoral themes were even used to appeal to women, who, did not have the right to vote at the time but were influential as consumers.
As important as the incorporation of electoral imagery into everyday routines was the cultivation of the concept of the “man in the street” as being at the center of electoral politics. The vision of the “man in the street” nurtured in the pages of these dailies was perhaps not very politically invested per se, but was at the center of the political process. In turn, politics was portrayed as being an amusing party of daily life. Most importantly, the “man in the street,” these newspapers suggested, had power. He was important.

Finally, in what is perhaps the thinnest but potentially the most intriguing section of the book, Schoop Worrall investigates how the leadership of the various political parties responded to the emergence of the new dailies. The section is thinnest because by his own admission, Schoop-Worrall was not able to identify much direct historical data in the form of party records or specific correspondence that reflected the views of the leaders of the various political parties on the new dailies. Consequently, many of his insights are drawn from indirect evidence and through inference.

But this material is intriguing because the party that presumably should have benefited most by the success of daily newspapers aimed at the lower-middle and working classes, the Labour Party, was generally hostile to the new dailies. Moreover, its own attempt to emulate the model failed. Nonetheless, following the long Edwardian period, Labour emerged as one of the dominant national parties, supplanting the Liberal Party, which also disparaged the new dailies.

Generally speaking, the Liberals and Labour felt that editorially, the new dailies largely favored Conservative political positions. The predilection of mass newspapers to tend to be conservative politically has continued over time. Nevertheless, through a close examination of the press summaries the Conservative Party provided to its officials and candidates in the long Edwardian period, it seems as if the new dailies did not occupy a major role in the grass roots of that party’s engagement with the press either.

Though more suggestive than definitive, as could be expected from a slim volume, Schoop-Worrall’s study has much to commend in it. It identifies how deeply rooted the “horse race” metaphor is in election coverage and how the presentation of politics in the mass media was as significant as the specific content. It chronicles the emergence of the image of the “man in the street,” a conceptualization of the mass public as one that is not particularly politically engaged yet an appropriate focus for mass political communication. At the same time, it shows how electoral politics were incorporated as a routine part of everyday life. Finally, the study complicates the relationship of political parties to the mass newspapers that entered the marketplace at the beginning of the twentieth century.

And while this monograph makes a valuable contribution to an apparently otherwise overlooked episode in British media history, to non-British, particularly American, readers, it is a useful reminder that what might seem innovative in a specific country may not be quite so much. Instead, transnational social, political, and economic forces may lead to similar outcomes in different countries experiencing similar trends.
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