

Palgrave Studies in the History of the Media



The News of the World and the British Press, 1843–2011

'Journalism for the Rich, Journalism for the Poor'

Edited by Laurel Brake
Chandrika Kaul and Mark W. Turner



Palgrave Studies in the History of the Media

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***The News of the World* and the British Press, 1843–2011**

Journalism for the Rich, Journalism for the Poor

Edited by

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Chandrika Kaul

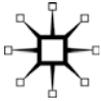
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List of Abbreviations

<i>DNB</i>	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
<i>Express</i>	<i>Daily Express</i>
<i>ILN</i>	<i>Illustrated London News</i>
<i>Lloyd's</i>	<i>Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper</i>
<i>Mirror</i>	<i>Daily Mirror</i>
<i>NOTW</i>	<i>News of the World</i>
<i>ODNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
<i>Reynolds's</i>	<i>Reynolds's Weekly Newspaper</i>

Introduction

The lamentable closure of the *NOTW* in 2011 and the public attention it attracted provoked this book. Its germ was a small-scale study day, set up to investigate this title – suddenly history – in its existence across three centuries, from 1843 to 2011. In the summer of 2011, News International (part of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp) made the decision to close the paper, in the midst of a deepening scandal that purported to implicate the paper in 'phone hacking', that is, accessing messages on private mobile phones in order to gather information about celebrities, royalty and the general public. Such allegations had been made since 2006, but they came to a head in 2011, with suggestions that the phone of Milly Dowler, a murdered British schoolgirl, had been hacked after her death, a gross personal violation that led to a serious backlash from the public and from advertisers. The phone hacking scandal led to the Establishment of the Leveson Inquiry – a public inquiry set up to investigate the practices and ethics of the British press, including the *NOTW* but extending well it beyond.¹ This was not an august end for a paper that had been, as this volume demonstrates, central to the cultural life of Britain at various points, and among the world's highest selling newspapers.

The chapters here address the span of the run, with seven contributions on the nineteenth-century broadsheet, seven on the twentieth century and two on its truncated twenty-first century life. Our collective research has enabled us not only to scrutinise the title in a book-length study, the first undertaken by scholars,² but also to unearth obscure facts from diverse sources, to examine themes and periods in detail and to assemble a working bibliography of previous work that future scholars can consult. In its aim, it might be compared with recent collective work on the journalism of *Blackwood's Magazine*, Charles Dickens, G.W.M. Reynolds, and W.T. Stead, having taken up their subject afresh for the twenty-first century.³

Scrutiny of the origins of the paper is informative. To many contemporary readers' surprise in 2011, the *NOTW* was one of the oldest surviving Sundays, along with the *Observer* (1791 ff) and the *Sunday Times* (1822 ff). It

was also notably respectable and news rich from the beginning. During the greater part of the nineteenth century, it was a demanding read, like almost all of its immediate competitors. A densely set, unillustrated, six-column broadsheet, it adhered to its aim of providing an entertaining and informative weekly for readers across the classes – ‘journalism for the rich, ... journalism for the poor’ – at an affordable price. Its interest in reform, domestic and international politics, entertainment and news of various kinds was instantly signalled to readers by the contents of its front page. Its breadth of coverage is indicated by its inclusion of weekly market prices (it was the official reporter for the *Grocers’ Gazette*, for example), a literary page with serious reviews and court reports. For nearly 50 years, from 1843 until 1891, the *News of the World* was owned and probably edited by family members of its founder and first editor, John Browne Bell. This dynasty was succeeded by another newspaper family, that of Henry Lascelles Carr, who purchased it in 1891. His nephew Emsley Carr edited it for another 50 years, and succeeded his uncle as proprietor in 1902. It was from Emsley’s son, William Carr, that Rupert Murdoch purchased the paper in 1969.

The first seven chapters locate the paper in the genre of the nineteenth-century Sundays, with the dual role of entertainment and information gathering. Melissa Score’s Chapter 4 on the role of campaigning in such a genre examines the resulting tensions in the early years – between a broad-based appeal across class and politics, the drive for change between the Reform Acts and the allocation of space for news and entertainment. In Chapter 5, Alexis Easley explores the *NOTW* in relation to what she calls the ‘feminisation’ of the emerging mass market press, not only friendly to but also cultivating female readers. In these different ways – investigative reporting and gendered interests – the nineteenth-century paper resembled its descendants, more familiar to us. However, contrary to expectation, as Chandrika Kaul argues in Chapter 6, on political questions of Empire the *NOTW* proved enlightened and moderate, balanced and informed rather than intemperate and jingoistic. Through the first in-depth case studies of the *NOTW*’s coverage of the Great Indian Rebellion (1857–58) and the first royal tour of the sub-continent by a Prince of Wales in 1875–76, she concludes that the paper displayed a remarkable prescience and engagement with imperial issues.

Chapters 1–3 by James Mussell, Laurel Brake and Mark W. Turner map the history of the paper over the nineteenth century, assessing the initial intentions announced in its manifesto, its multiple editions and problems of distribution and its actual range of contents. They gauge how it responded to the roller coaster of changes accompanying the removal of taxes on newspapers between 1855 and 1861. What were the implications of its decision to remain a cheap title after 1861 at *2d.*, but not the cheapest at *1d.*, like most of its competitors? Rather than defining the paper as one merely of declining sales between 1855 and 1891, we show that it was responsive to the new

environment of sensationalism and the New Journalism, dropping its price to a penny in 1880 and adding fiction to its contents in 1881, long before its competitors. Once its new owners – the Carrs – took charge, enlargement of the format of the paper, introduction of illustrations, cartoons and enhanced sports coverage gradually followed, so that by the end of the century it hardly resembled its earlier ‘self’. Chris Williams’s Chapter 8 on J.M. Staniforth’s weekly cartoons on page 1, from 1893 to 1921, offers a pithy account of the refashioned paper – its politics, its format and artists, who were a recent addition to the categories of its staff.

A persistent aspect of the paper throughout its history is the symbiosis among its crime reports, sensation and entertainment and, appropriately, this crops up in all of the essays here. Our collective findings suggest that these elements of the *NOTW* vary – in definition, format and prominence – at different periods in the paper’s long run. While crime reporting was part of all weekend papers in the nineteenth century, in the *NOTW* it remained throughout the period as it was initially, part of the news reporting of the various courts, comparable to Parliamentary reporting in the daily press, which was similarly often spiced with verbatim quotation and interesting detail. In a genre that did not generally include fiction, these court narratives had elements of developing ‘stories’.⁴ As the arrival of the cheap press and sensation fiction coincided in the 1860s, so the crime reports in the *NOTW* and the other Sunday press began to spill outside of the court reports and to acquire at times of a major trial, for example, the prominence of war or civic news, along with the sensational style of such reports. The ‘entertainment’ element of the Sessions, Magistrates’, Old Bailey and divorce court reports was intensified in a hybrid type of contents, with ‘news’ and ‘entertainment’ elements finely balanced.

By the late 1880s–90s, just as the new iteration of the *NOTW* was being crafted, the tales of Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, ‘sensational crime stories’, begin to appear in the monthly *Strand Magazine*. Doyle describes a character who ‘reads nothing but the criminal news and the personal adverts’ and ‘knows every detail of sensational literature and the history of crime’. He is a ‘Walking Calendar of Crime’. The *NOTW*’s appropriation of its crime and court material to headline-grabbing, sensational and entertaining stories is reflected in Conan Doyle’s simultaneous alertness to the importance of crime in popular culture, and its translation into fiction. Realised in the character of Sherlock Holmes, popular and entertaining crime is distributed by Doyle in the New Journalism form of linked short fiction tales, a genre tailored for the new monthly, the *Strand Magazine*, in which they appeared.⁵

In the twentieth century, the *NOTW* was probably remembered most for two things – its apparent sensationalism and its extraordinary circulation figures, it being at one point the highest selling Sunday paper in the world, with a huge readership. As Alison Oram, Adrian Bingham and

other contributors suggest here, ‘sensationalism’ is not a stable term across historical moments and the uses of ‘sensational’ or scandalous narratives are multiple and sometimes surprising. Scoops of various kinds, crime reporting and celebrity coverage – all play their part in the formation of what gets loosely termed ‘sensational’ material, but the paper’s contents were always more varied. Martin Conboy, for example, assesses the paper’s ‘residual radicalism’ in his overview of the popular Sunday press, and the extent to which the *NOTW* continued to exploit its appeal to readers’ taste for scandal and sensation until its closure.

The twenty-first century *NOTW* is defined by its place as a tabloid, a transformation that occurred in 1984, in the hands of Rupert Murdoch, who took over the paper in 1969. A sensational broadsheet and a sensational tabloid are different cultural products, and while the *NOTW* may now be recalled more in its tabloid than broadsheet form, it is important to understand the long history of this transformation from one kind of newspaper to another. Chapters here by Kevin Williams, James Rodgers and Julian Petley all focus our attention on the *NOTW* in relation to shifts in popular journalism in the twentieth century, with regard to regulation, emerging technologies, news gathering methods and the impact of a media mogul.

The astonishing longevity of the *NOTW*’s popularity remains one of the most compelling features of its history. George Orwell, tongue in cheek, reminded readers of its role in ‘The Decline of the English Murder’ in 1946.⁶ John Stokes takes the measure of this popularity at a high point in the 1950s, when the title pervaded all aspects of British cultural life at that time, straddling class in fascinating ways. Kevin Rafter tracks the paper’s strength by tracing its history in Ireland in the twentieth century, arguing that the paper moved from a place as an ‘outsider’ publication to one with a nearly semi-official status. Both Stokes and Rafter demonstrate the depth and breadth of the paper’s reach across class, nation and culture. While the contents of our book chart the changing nature of the *NOTW* from 1843 to 2011, they also make clear that such material is embedded in an economic and technological context and a newspaper text of considerable variety – news rich, investigative, business and reader oriented and outward looking. The impact of new printing machines – the Hoe Press – in the 1890s, for example, enabled the paper to print thousands of copies per hour, preparing the way for mass circulation over the next decade or two. The recent ‘phone hacking’ scandals remind us that news and news-gathering technologies can operate in a delicate ecology. Both examples, however, suggest ways in which newspapers are always developing and changing in relation to the new technologies available to them, a theme at the centre of James Rodgers’s Chapter 15. The final contribution here, the ‘Afterword’ from Neil Berry, differs from other chapters on these topics,

in that it provides a more reflective space in which to think about the Leveson Inquiry and recent events in the wake of phone hacking over the past decade. Perhaps too soon yet to be considered 'history', Leveson offers us an important moment in which to consider a whole range of issues connected to press regulation and freedom and, more broadly, the role of the press – of the popular press like the *NOTW* – in the contemporary world. Berry's piece opens out, we hope, into wider discussions in a narrative that continues to be written.

Part of the aim of this study is to establish more precise dates and accurate names from what can be gleaned so far about the *NOTW*'s business history and key events in the early stages of its purchase by Rupert Murdoch. Much remains unknown, but in aid of future research we have begun to identify important lacunae, as well as resources. Among the latter is the newspaper's archive from 1891 at News UK.⁷ Among the former is uncertainty about the identity of the editors between 1877 and 1891. This is directly attributable to a lack of information about the proprietors in these years, Walter and Adolphus Bell, who appear in the most skeletal fashion in Eamon Dyas's *Scoop!* and not at all in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.⁸ What has been striking for many of us undertaking new research for the volume is the way in which important figures from the history of the press can be largely absent from major resources like the *Dictionary of National Biography (DNB)*, as well as from obituaries and other sources where researchers might hope to glean important information. This is partly a reflection of the culture of the period, not simply the attitudes of the gatekeepers. For nineteenth-century sources and twentieth-century ones before the war, such as the *DNB* and newspaper obituaries, journalists and wealthy newspaper proprietors were of relatively low social status. Mitchell's *Newspaper Press Directory* of 1854 noted 'that the conductors and members of the press have no recognised standing',⁹ and this is endorsed retrospectively by E.T. Raymond who avers that in the 1880s and 1890s journalists were barely professional, proprietors were commercial 'tradesman' and it was 'part of the character' of editors 'to be anonymous'.¹⁰

Circulation is another area of uncertainty, especially between 1855 and the early twentieth century. Even when figures are offered by various commentators or ex-journalists, they differ considerably. This may be explained by A.P. Wadsworth, who dubs the 1850s through the 1930s 'the period of secrecy', when 'all but a few papers jealously guarded the volume of their sales'.¹¹ A tantalising glimpse of the circulation of the *NOTW* in these years is provided in the visual testimony of a wall hoarding probably mounted on the occasion of the achievement of sales of 1 million by *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* on 23 February 1896. In highlighting this event, remembered and described by an employee of the *NOTW*, some 25 years afterward, and *not* accompanied by an image of the poster, which has proved untraceable,

R. Power Berrey's point is that at this time, the *NOTW* was not even in sight of circulation of a million, despite its claims to the contrary:

Lloyd's Weekly News had a huge poster on prominent hoardings. This depicted a yacht race, with a buoy labelled 'The Million Mark.' A splendid craft with the word *Lloyd's* on the mainsail was rounding the buoy while a string of boats representing other Sunday newspapers straggled far behind. The *News of the World* was not even in the picture. It was beyond the horizon: listing heavily, presumed more or less sunk.¹²

This is borne out by figures for these years compiled by UK News from secondary sources in the *NOTW* Archive, which suggest that for 1896 the *NOTW's* circulation was 99, 539 copies per issue.

The various newspapers' descriptions of themselves in advertisements for the press directories tend to obscure the facts rather than clarify them, and the press directories' own brief assessments of the titles tend not to reveal hard numbers.¹³ The *NOTW*, for example, describes itself in the early 1890s as having 'one of the largest circulations in the world' and as being 'one of the first in point of circulation of all the journals exclusively devoted to public intelligence and the general business of a newspaper'.¹⁴ The *People* similarly 'claims to be the biggest Sunday penny paper' with 'Millions of Readers every week! The Sale of "The People" now considerably exceeds that of its older rivals with, possibly, a solitary exception'.¹⁵ *Reynolds's Weekly Newspaper* advertises its 'enormous circulation', with 'more than two million readers',¹⁶ and *Lloyd's* is said by Mitchell's to appeal 'to the million on the two great principles of quantity and cheapness'.¹⁷ Readership, as opposed to circulation and value for money in relation to pages offered per penny were used to puff a title that sought to position itself as a market leader. In other words, unsurprisingly, hyperbole prevailed in the press directories, whose chief purposes were to sell advertising space and to ensure a robust industry, making it difficult to pinpoint exact figures with any real precision at this time.

As the editors of the first scholarly volume of its kind to undertake close examination of the *NOTW*, we are conscious that the research contained here comes from individuals working in a range of disciplines – English, History, Journalism Studies and Media Studies – with specialisms that reach across visual and print media. All of us, however, are engaged in the practice of what we collectively understand as 'Media History', a rich and diverse field that seeks to understand the history of the media from a variety of angles. The kind of methodological difference that one can detect across the chapters that follow in part indicates that the field of Media History has multiple nodes. All of us, however, believe that understanding the media requires an understanding of the historical circumstances that shape the media – its content, financial structures, policies and relations to other

institutions. The varied practice of media history – in part spearheaded by the journal *Media History*, which organised and sponsored the research day out of which this volume arises – is manifest here. Some articles focus on content analysis, others on historical mapping of the title's changes across time, and still others on the socio-cultural impact of the title, that is, the relationship of the *NOTW* to society at large. What it means to 'do' Media History, what it looks like in practice, is not singular; rather it borrows from a range of methods across disciplines – textual and discourse analysis, archival approaches and visual studies.

Among the constraints common to all researchers of Media History, however, is limited access to the material being studied. That is, not all researchers have access to material equally. Researching the *NOTW* has been a sobering reminder of this point for many of us, and the research realities came as something of a surprise. The simple point to make is that full runs of the paper are scarce, even in the UK where the paper was based. There are *only two full runs* of the *NOTW* in the UK: one in the public domain at the British Library (where you can easily consult it on open access microfilm, if you can get to central London) and one in private hands at News UK (now the UK trading name of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp). There are partial runs on paper – mostly since the late 1960s, in a few universities and at the National Library of Scotland, online access from 1996 or 1998 on Factiva and Lexis Nexus in a cluster of other universities and odd volumes or a few issues at even a smaller handful of university libraries in the UK. Because the title has hardly been collected by libraries and was not digitised before 1996, the entirety of the nineteenth- and most of the twentieth-century runs are only available in the UK in London, at the British Library, News UK and in the British Library Reading Room at Boston Spa. This situation, i.e. that the first 150 years of the run is not in one of the databases of digitised print material (such as British Newspapers Online) that have emerged in recent years, has been a serious impediment to research.

This reminder of the uneven access to the run may account for something that has struck many of us in undertaking our research, that is, the relative paucity of scholarly material focused on the *NOTW*, in most periods of its history. For most of the twentieth century, the *NOTW* was the UK's highest selling Sunday paper, and its founding in 1843 made it among the oldest of papers until it closed in 2011. The majority of recent criticism focuses on the paper post-1969, in the Murdoch era; however, considering its prominence in British culture and its longevity in media history, we might expect to see more scholarship addressing its longer history. Lack of access to the paper itself might account for much of this striking absence, but there are other things at work here. The history of newspaper scholarship – in the UK's and elsewhere – has tended *not* to focus on the Sunday or weekend press, and to privilege the daily press above all else. Virginia Berridge's seminal synoptic essay on the Sunday press of the mid-nineteenth

century, published in 1978, remains an important touchstone for scholars. However, the questions that she raised more than 37 years ago, and the frameworks through which she read and conceptualised the Sunday press, have been too little challenged since then.¹⁸ It might be that re-reading the Sunday press (if you had access to it) would lead to a rethinking of some of the categories that have become settled in our understanding of it, in relation to popular culture, politics, readership and class. Furthermore, the broadsheets usually, though not always, take precedence over the tabloids when it comes to serious academic study, so the *NOTW*'s shift to tabloid form after Murdoch became proprietor perhaps helped to ensure that it remained adrift from academic study. New histories of the British press, by Kevin Williams and others, have helped to remind us of the importance of the Sunday and weekend papers, along with other areas of media history that remain under-researched.¹⁹

Contributors to this volume have found a number of books that document the history of the *NOTW* and provide enormous amounts of useful material and information, deriving from archival work, interviews and other sources. Cyril Bainbridge and Roy Stockdill's *The News of the World Story: 150 Years of the World's Bestselling Newspaper* published in 1993, Matthew Engel's *Tickle the Public* and Peter Burden's *News of the World? Fake Sheikhs & Royal Trappings* have done valuable work. However, these books are written as 'popular history', addressed to the general reader, and they often lack detail of their sources. We have found and followed many leads offered in these and other places and, where possible, contributors have verified facts and figures or demystified information, with rigour. We are especially indebted to the News UK Archive in this respect. It is because of this kind of work that we feel confident that ours will be a significant volume on which future scholars can build and develop further thinking. With future projects in mind, we include a bibliography of sources upon which we have collectively drawn.

Notes

1. For the Leveson Inquiry, see www.levesoninquiry.org.uk. Leveson's first report, the full text of which can be accessed on the Leveson website, was published in 2012. A second report may follow once all of the criminal cases are completed. In other words, the fallout from the phone hacking scandal, which led to the closing of the *NOTW*, is ongoing.
2. Extant work has been written by journalists – memoirs by staff of the *NOTW* (such as Berrey, Emsley Carr and Somerfield), or journalists on other papers (Bainbridge and Stockdill, Matthew Engel, and E.T. Raymond). Media historians who have treated the title or Sundays more generally include most notably Virginia Berridge and James Curran. See Bibliography.
3. D. Finkelstein (ed.), *Print Culture and the Blackwood Tradition, 1805–1930*, Toronto, 2006, H. Mackenzie and B. Winyard (eds), *Charles Dickens and the Mid-Victorian*

Press 1850–1870, Buckingham, 2013, A. Humpherys and L. James (eds), *G.W.M Reynolds, Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press*, Aldershot and Burlington, VT, 2008 and L. Brake, E. King, R. Luckhurst, and J. Mussell (eds), *W.T. Stead, Newspaper Revolutionary*, London, 2012.

4. See J. Knelman, 'Subtly Sensational: A Study of Early Victorian Crime Reporting', *Journal of Newspaper and Periodical History*, 8.1 (1992) pp. 34–41, which discusses affinities between the narratives of fiction and those of crime reporting in the daily press in the nineteenth century.
5. The *Strand Magazine* (1891), which took up and circulated Doyle's tales was a new title founded by the publisher of the wildly popular *Tit-Bits*, George Newnes, who had founded it in 1881. Quotations are from Doyle's notebooks and curatorial Labels at the Sherlock Holmes Exhibition, the Museum of London, 2015. For Holmes and his use of newspapers, see C. Pettitt, 'Throwaway Holmes' in A. Werner (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes. The Man Who Never Lived and Will Never Die*, London, 2015, pp. 185–95.
6. See G. Orwell, 'Decline of the English Murder', in *Tribune*, 15 February, 1946, and *Shooting an Elephant and other Essays*, London, 1952, in which Orwell writes, tongue in cheek, 'It is Sunday afternoon, preferably before the war. The wife is already asleep in the armchair and the children have been sent out for a nice long walk. You put your feet up on the sofa, settle your spectacles on your nose, and open the *News of the World*.'
7. See the Bibliography for a note by Nick Mays on the holdings of the News UK Archive.
8. *Scoop!* is a biographical dictionary of journalists and newspaper history, accessible by subscription and also available in some libraries.
9. 'The Power and the Character of the Press', Mitchell's *Newspaper Press Directory*, [1854?], p. 4.
10. E.T. Raymond, 'Old and New Journalists', *Portraits of the Nineties*. London, 1921. pp. 291 and 293.
11. A.P. Wadsworth, 'Newspaper Circulations, 1800–1954', *Transactions of the Manchester Statistical Society 1954–5*, Manchester, 1955, p. 1.
12. R. Power Berrey. *The Romance of a Great Newspaper*. London, n.d. [1922?], 46; quoted by M. Engel, *Tickle the Public. One Hundred Years of the Popular Press*. London, 1996, p. 208. The editors wish to thank Matthew Engel for his considerable effort and help in attributing this account to R. Power Berrey. Berrey attributes the hoarding to 'c. 1891', but *Lloyd's* only attained a circulation of a million in February 1896. In this period of secrecy about circulation, the implication of the poster that the *NOTW's* circulation remained below a million in 1896 is also implied by Bainbridge and Stockdill, in *The News of the World Story: 150 Years of the World's Bestselling Newspaper*, New York, 1993, p. 61, who note that in 1898, only 56,500 copies were sent to direct agents outside London. Circulation figures from the *NOTW* News UK archive suggest that it reached a million (1,173,309) only in 1906.
13. This is not for want of trying. See Deacon's note on 'Newspaper Circulations' in *Newspaper Handbook and Advertiser's Guide*, London, 1881, pp. 26–28, for example, which described its pursuit of proprietors for circulation figures, most of whom did not supply them. From that date, the first available in the British Library in London, Deacon's included the note annually. In 1883, the subtitle of the *Handbook* records its frustrations, reading 'And their circulations, where attainable.' By 1894, Deacon's is plainly exasperated with the proprietors, and

adds pointed text (pp. 58–60) to the annual note on circulations: ‘In any case of doubt,’ they write, ‘we refuse to print the figures, leaving the matter open for advertisers to form their own opinions or to obtain ours by direct communication with us’ (p. 59). An entire paragraph is added, giving examples of ‘the reckless manner in which some publishers will exaggerate the circulation of their newspapers’ (p. 60). The final sentence is equally admonitory: ‘We would not have thought that such gross exaggeration as these are general amongst newspaper publishers, but we believe that the figures of circulation given in this book may be generally relied upon as being as nearly as possible correct’ (p. 60). As early as 1854, Mitchell’s *Newspaper Press Directory*, adjacent to an article on ‘The Power and the Character of the Press’, p. 4, published the stamp returns figures as the basis for circulation for the previous three years, but once the compulsory stamp was abolished in 1855, newspapers could boast circulation figures for which there was no sure way of testing, as Deacon’s later noted.

14. Mitchell’s *Newspaper Press Directory*, London, 1890, p. 225.
15. *Willing’s British & Irish Press Guide*. London, James Willing, 1891, p. 130.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 362.
17. Mitchell’s *Newspaper Press Directory*, London, 1894, p. 66.
18. See K. Williams, *Read All About It! A History of the British Newspaper*, London, 2009, and comments here in Chapter 2.
19. See K. Williams, 2009 and *Get Me a Murder a Day: A History of Media and Communication in Britain*, 2nd edn. London, 2010.

1

The Foundation and Early Years of the *News of the World*: 'Capacious Double Sheets'

James Mussell

Introduction

The *News of the World* (NOTW) was established in 1843 and quickly found a readership. By 1846, when Charles Mitchell first published his *Newspaper Press Directory*, the NOTW was claiming a weekly circulation of over 35,000. In this chapter, I consider how the NOTW carved out such a remarkable place for itself in the mid-nineteenth-century market, becoming one of the largest-selling newspapers of all time. The Sunday newspaper was fairly well established, the first – *E. Johnson's British Gazette and Sunday Monitor* – had appeared in 1779, but it was the papers that emerged in the 1840s that demonstrated the large potential audience for cheap weekly newspapers. These papers, led by Edward Lloyd's *Lloyd's Illustrated Newspaper* (later *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, then *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* 1842–1931), took advantage of the reduction of the newspaper stamp duty in 1836 to keep their prices as low as possible while orienting their contents towards the interests of this emerging market. Their success in identifying and cultivating a readership amongst the working- and lower-middle classes meant that they reached more readers than newspapers ever had before. It is in this context, as a pioneering publication in the vanguard of a new and successful newspaper genre, that we should consider the NOTW.

The success of the cheap Sunday newspaper is generally attributed to its generous coverage of violent crime and close attention to the more scandalous proceedings in the courts. However, while the *Newspaper Press Directory* recognised that the NOTW was emblematic of a particular genre, it did not mention this type of content at all. According to the *Press Directory*, the NOTW was 'one of the many papers which compresses into a capacious double sheet the news of the week.'¹ All weeklies contained the week's news: what was remarkable about the NOTW and its rivals was the amount of news they contained given their price. For the *Newspaper Press Directory*,

what made these papers distinct was the way they were oriented towards ‘a class of readers who, though respectable, may be supposed – through incessant occupation in the week – not to have had much opportunity before the Saturday evening for newspaper reading.’² It was these busy readers, unwilling to pay for a daily paper and without the time to read it, who constituted the market for the cheap Sunday press. These readers might have wanted to read, in a mixture of prurience and shock, of the latest murder, but these were not the motives recorded by the *Newspaper Press Directory*.

The *Newspaper Press Directory* was aimed at advertisers and newsagents and, while it did not shy away from noting a paper’s politics or orientation to the police courts, tended to present papers positively. As the *NOTW* was a cheap weekly, it might not have been necessary for the *Press Directory* to make explicit the type of content printed in its pages. Nonetheless, its delineation of this new genre is important, as it situated it on grounds other than those for which it has become known. As Raymond Williams, amongst others, has argued, the cheap Sundays laid the foundations for the commercial mass press.³ One of the key arguments for the reduction of the newspaper stamp duty in 1836 was that it would enable the more respectable publications to compete with the radical unstamped papers that crowded the bottom end of the market. The success of the cheap Sundays, when they appeared 16 years later, appeared to have achieved this end, displacing the unstamped press with newspapers whose politics and contents, although not ideal, were tolerable to the Establishment. To understand the appeal of this new genre is to understand the broader political shift, as early nineteenth-century radicalism gave way to an increasingly hegemonic Victorian liberalism. The *NOTW*, both less sensational and less radical than its two closest rivals, was the most representative of the genre. To recognise its appeal, we must do more than look to its more lurid contents.

What follows is in two parts. The first describes the foundation of the *NOTW* and its place in the market for Sunday newspapers. The paper’s founder, John Browne Bell (1779–1855), was well placed to launch a new, cheap Sunday newspaper as he already had substantial experience in the print trade. The success of *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper* made apparent the market for cheap, unillustrated Sunday papers: Bell, who already owned one Sunday paper, launched the *NOTW* in an attempt to develop this new market. The second part explores the way the *NOTW* positioned itself as a new cheap Sunday newspaper. While it followed *Lloyd’s Weekly* in an attempt to win a share of its working-class readers, the *NOTW* presented itself as an up-market alternative available for the same price. Its rapid success suggests that Bell judged the market correctly, and the *NOTW* remained remarkably consistent in both form and content for the next 30 years. However, the newspaper market changed radically over this period, particularly after the repeal of the final tax on knowledge: the removal of paper duty in

Gladstone's 1861 budget. The *NOTW*'s refusal to follow its competitors and reduce its price to a penny has been cited as the reason for its declining fortunes. It had conceived of itself as a respectable newspaper, aligned to the interests of working- and lower-middle-class readers and at a price they could afford. While the *NOTW* succeeded in adapting the upmarket newspaper for lower-class readers, after 1860 it was no longer a cheap weekly and so had to sell itself on other grounds.

John Browne Bell and the Sunday newspaper in the early nineteenth century

The market for Sunday newspapers was inaugurated by *E. Johnson's British Gazette* in 1779 and, by 1795, there were five Sundays published in London.⁴ Despite concerns about the sanctity of the Sabbath, these new Sunday papers closely resembled those published during the working week. *E. Johnson's British Gazette's* only concession to the Sabbath, for instance, was the inclusion of the 'Sunday Monitor' column on its front page, where the theatre advertisements would otherwise be placed.⁵ In 1796, John Browne Bell's father, John Bell, entered the market with *Bell's Weekly Messenger* (1796–1896). John Bell was a well-regarded (and well-connected) figure in the London print trade. He was a member of the syndicate behind *The Morning Post* (1772–1937) and his periodicals, the *World, or Fashionable Advertiser* (1787–94) and *La Belle Assemblée* (1806–47), were important pioneering publications in their respective genres. His *Weekly Messenger* was a successful innovation of the Sunday newspaper genre, developing its review-like aspects to increase its appeal over the course of the week. Bell ensured its respectability, moderating its content and refusing to take advertisements, to make it suitable for families. At 7 ½d it was fairly expensive but the paper was considered good value (it expanded in 1802, 1810 and 1828) and found a market, particularly amongst country readers. Its circulation was modest – around 6,000 a week in 1803, climbing to 14,000 at the time of Nelson's funeral in 1806 – but this was sufficient to establish the paper, and it prospered, surviving until 1896, when it became the *Country Sport and Messenger of Agriculture*.⁶

The market became more competitive in the early years of the nineteenth century and, by 1812, there were at least 12 papers published on a Sunday.⁷ *The Observer* (1791–) and the *Weekly Dispatch* (1795–1961) were already well established, but they were joined by the *Sunday Times* (1821–, originally as *The New Observer*) and *Bell's Life in London* (1822), amongst others. The name 'Bell' clearly operated as a signifier for a type of Sunday newspaper. The *Weekly Dispatch*, which was edited by an Irish barrister called Robert Bell, had appeared as *Bell's Weekly Dispatch* for the first six years of its run; when *Bell's Life in London* appeared in 1822, Robert Bell made clear that it was nothing to do with him (it was founded by another Robert Bell⁸) and noted,

too, that the *Weekly Dispatch* was unconnected with John Bell of the *Weekly Messenger*.⁹ The market was clearly attractive but, because of the rise of the newspaper stamp duty in 1804 to 3 ½d, there was little room to compete through price. Instead, the papers differentiated themselves through their content. The *Weekly Dispatch* (8 ½d) and *Bell's Life in London* (7d), for instance, were both more radical and more seedy than the *Weekly Messenger*, targeting a knowing, London-based, male readership.

John Browne Bell made a number of attempts to establish himself in this market before the launch of the *NOTW* in 1843. He was motivated by a combination of commercial astuteness and personal grievance, often pitching his publications directly against those of his father. Bell's origins are a little murky. The *Dictionary of National Biography* (*DNB*) claims that John Bell 'appears never to have married and left his estate to his niece', but this appears to have been a deliberate attempt to disinherit his son.¹⁰ John Browne Bell's record as a publisher certainly suggests he was aggrieved. In 1806 he launched *Le Beau Monde*, a three-shilling monthly that directly imitated his father's *La Belle Assemblée*, which had appeared just a few months previously, even going so far as to take its title from one of *La Belle Assemblée's* sections. In January 1808, he entered the Sunday market with his *National Register* (subtitled 'The King, Constitution, and Laws'), an 8d. weekly that combined foreign and domestic news, commercial intelligence and police reports with a review of national political institutions. The paper was not a success, and in January 1809 Bell merged it with *Le Beau Monde*. The resulting paper, *Le Beau Monde and Monthly Register* lasted a few more months before being sold in April 1809, and Bell and his publishing partner, John de Camp, were declared bankrupt the following year.¹¹ In 1824 Bell returned to the monthly periodical market, publishing the *World of Fashion and Continental Feuilletons* (1824–51), another attempt to compete with his father's *La Belle Assemblée* with a title that also evoked the latter's *World, and Fashionable Advertiser* (1787). The *World of Fashion* was a success, partly no doubt due to its close association with Mary Ann Bell, who had previously managed the fashion section of *La Belle Assemblée* before it was sold by John Bell in 1821.¹² However, it was after the death of his father, in 1831, that Bell attempted a new Sunday paper and this new venture represented his most audacious attack on his father's reputation to date. The new publication was called *Bell's New Weekly Messenger* (1831–55), evoking his late father's *Weekly Messenger* while suggesting that it was both a continuation and successor.

While his father's *Weekly Messenger* circulated widely in the country (it would absorb the *Farmer's Journal* in 1834), *Bell's New Weekly Messenger* was intended for metropolitan readers and was modelled on established publications such as the *Weekly Dispatch* and *Bell's Life in London*. This made commercial sense, as, according to James Grant, these were the two papers with the highest circulation of any paper, 'daily or weekly, in the United

Kingdom'.¹³ Bell disavowed any connection with his father's paper, which he referred to as 'that old journal, commonly called in the country "My Grandmother's Newspaper"'.¹⁴ Instead of its country interests and moderate Toryism, Bell espoused a form of liberalism that Grant thought verged 'on extreme radicalism'.¹⁵ In this, the *New Weekly Messenger* positioned itself between *Bell's Life* and the *Weekly Dispatch*, which Grant thought were 'moderately Liberal' and 'Radicalism in its purest form' respectively.¹⁶ In a move that he would repeat again with the *NOTW*, Bell entered a market that had already been opened up by his competitors and then attempted to compete on content. *Bell's New Weekly Messenger* had 16 pages and contained 64 columns, larger than all of its rivals for more or less the same price.

Bell's New Weekly Messenger was initially 8d. (the *Weekly Dispatch* was 8 1/2d. and *Bell's Life* 7d.), but, like most weeklies, it reduced its price to 6d. after the reduction of the newspaper stamp duty in 1836. Despite their politics, these long-running weeklies made little attempt to compete with the cheaper, usually unstamped publications at the lower end of the market. It was in this area, however, that the *NOTW* would take shape. In the 1840s, there were a number of unstamped weeklies, usually with connections to radical politics and the chapbook and broadside traditions, that attempted to mimic the more respectable Sunday press. For instance, Edward Lloyd launched his *Penny Sunday Times and People's Police Gazette* (1840), its title alluding to both *The Sunday Times* and *Cleave's Weekly Police Gazette* while conflating them both under the master-sign of the penny. In the same year a *Penny Weekly Dispatch* appeared. In 1841, this titular dexterity reached its climax with *Bell's Penny Dispatch, Sporting and Police Gazette, and Newspaper of Romance, and Penny Sunday Chronicle* (1841).¹⁷ Nothing to do with John Bell, Robert Bell or John Browne Bell, this paper included 'Bell' as one of many markers of genre in its title intended to demonstrate its capaciousness while masking its generic resemblance to its other penny rivals.

Edward Lloyd proved a particularly astute reader of the market. Observing the success of the *Illustrated London News (ILN)*, a sixpenny illustrated weekly published on a Saturday, Lloyd launched *Lloyd's Illustrated London Newspaper* on 27 November 1842. Appearing on Sunday not Saturday, it explicitly mimicked the front page of *ILN*, with a similar masthead, a large topical engraving and the same number of columns. At tuppence, *Lloyd's Illustrated London Newspaper* significantly undercut the *ILN*, but, as Lloyd's paper was stamped, it also signalled his interest in developing the cheap end of the legitimate market. After accounting for the stamp duty, Lloyd's income was still a penny per issue but, selling at tuppence, his newspaper was in a different market. Despite the paper's success (in December 1842 he claimed that circulation was 100,000, 65,000 of which were in London¹⁸), Lloyd clearly believed that a different kind of publication was needed in this new market. From its eighth issue, dated 15 January 1843, Lloyd expanded the paper's size, redesigned the masthead

so that it no longer resembled that of the *ILN*, removed the engraving and hired Douglas Jerrold as editor. He also increased the cover price to 2 ½d, suggesting that he believed that readers would be willing to pay more for a larger paper.¹⁹ In this new guise, the paper, now called *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, with its five columns rather than three and on larger paper, more closely resembled the established form of the newspaper rather than the cheap illustrated weekly from which it was derived. In September 1843, he increased the price by another halfpenny, making it 3d, while adding another sheet to make it twelve pages rather than eight. Each increase in price raised Lloyd's revenue substantially and, although sales must have been affected each time, any losses were soon absorbed by the growing readership at the new price.

This was the newspaper that demonstrated the viability of the market for a cheap, stamped newspaper. Just as he had with *Bell's New Weekly Messenger*, John Browne Bell watched one of his rivals establish a niche and then launched his own competing publication. On the 1 October 1843, the *NOTW* appeared, printed and published by James John Rogers at 30 Holywell Street, London, an address well known in the trade as the former shop of the late printer and publisher Thomas Dolby. A threepenny Sunday newspaper, it was a marked departure for Bell and it placed him in direct competition with *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*. However, he was not simply an imitator, following where others led. The *NOTW* might have been aimed at a similar set of readers, but this new paper would appeal on its own terms.

The News of the World

The entry for the *NOTW* in the *Newspaper Press Directory* of 1846 gives a sense of the new paper's place in the market. After noting that it is 'one of the many papers which compresses into a capacious double sheet the news of the week', the entry goes on to describe the *NOTW*'s content:

It has no very distinctive feature in its composition, which simply aims at giving as much news as possible; and of a general as well as political character. There is some attention given to literature; and a small selection of sporting news. Its commercial intelligence is good, and its 'Grocer's Gazette' seems to mark it out as favoured by that class of traders. It is well suited for the respectable tradesman and intelligent persons in that sphere; and its being cheaper than any newspaper (except one), tends of course to enlarge the circle of its readers.²⁰

The emphasis is on economy and the amount of material the paper contains for its price, rather than anything exceptional about its contents. For the *Newspaper Press Directory*, the *NOTW* was a cheap, respectable weekly aimed at the upper working and lower middle classes.