

PRINT, POLITICS AND PUBLIC OPINION

NEWSPAPERS IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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Newspapers in the nineteenth century, like the internet, mobile phones and social media in our own age, transformed communications and information. To some they represented positive progress; others thought them dangerous.

Taxes on Knowledge

By the late eighteenth century, weekly newspapers were well-established in many English counties. *Berrow's Worcester Journal*, *Derby Mercury* and *Aris's Birmingham Gazette* were

founded in 1709, 1732 and 1741 respectively. For liberal commentators the rise of the newspaper press was a sign of intellectual progress. By spreading information, newspapers would create a rational public opinion and act as a force for reform. However, for the Tory governments that held office in Britain almost continuously between 1783 and 1830, newspapers were dangerous. They feared that cheap print would spread radical doctrines among the lower classes, leading to social unrest and even revolution.

For this reason, Tory governments sought to restrict the growth of cheap newspapers through taxes on paper and advertisements and a stamp duty on newspapers, which were collectively dubbed 'the taxes on knowledge'. The aim was to price newspapers beyond the reach of the working classes.

The Golden Age of the Provincial Press

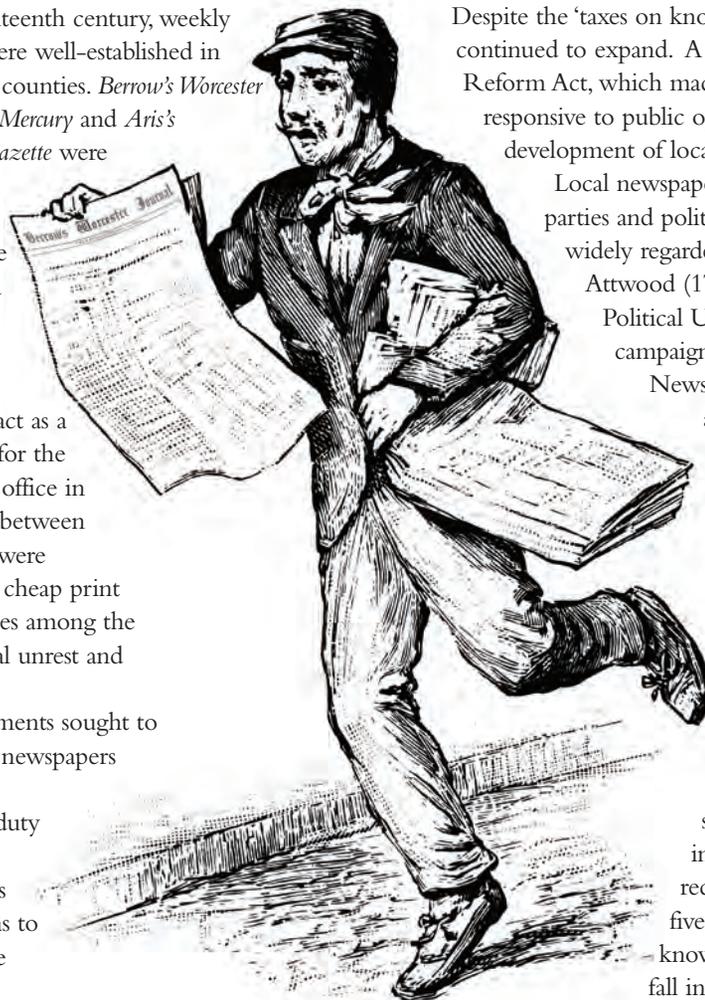
Despite the 'taxes on knowledge', the newspaper press continued to expand. A key driver of change was the 1832 Reform Act, which made MPs and Parliament more responsive to public opinion, and stimulated the development of local party organisation.

Local newspapers were closely associated with local parties and politicians. *The Birmingham Journal* was widely regarded as the mouthpiece of Thomas Attwood (1783-1856) and his radical Birmingham Political Union, which had led the popular campaign for parliamentary reform in 1831-2.

Newspapers were often started for political as much as commercial reasons.

Liberals established the *Hereford Times* in 1832 to counter the long-established Conservative *Hereford Journal*. The *Staffordshire Gazette* (1839-42) was a short-lived Conservative rival to the moderately Liberal *Staffordshire Advertiser*.

The second half of the nineteenth century was the Golden Age of the provincial press for several reasons. Firstly, the reduction of newspaper stamp duty from four-pence to a penny in 1836 allowed many newspapers to reduce their price from around seven to five pence. The abolition of the 'taxes on knowledge' between 1853 and 1861, the fall in paper prices and the development of



iStock/Newsquest Worcester/The Hive

The nineteenth century saw huge increases in the number of newspaper titles for sale. *Berrow's Worcester Journal* is believed to be the oldest still in print.

more productive printing technology made newspapers even cheaper. Long-established weekly newspapers such as the *Hereford Journal* cut their price to two-pence, while new newspapers such as the *Birmingham Daily Post*, launched in 1857, cost a penny.

Secondly, lower costs and an expanding market due to rising literacy levels led to a proliferation of newspaper titles. The number of English provincial newspapers increased from 375 in 1856 to 851 fifteen years later. By 1871, there were over a hundred papers in the West Midlands, with the more urbanised, populous and industrialised counties generally having more titles. There were 26 newspapers in Derbyshire, 24 in Warwickshire, 21 in Staffordshire, 20 in Worcestershire, 12 in Shropshire and 8 in Herefordshire. Derby was served by 6 different newspapers, Birmingham by 7, and Worcester by 4. Cheap newspapers were established in towns where they had previously been unviable, such as the *Walsall Free Press*, founded in 1856.

Thirdly, newspapers were published with increasing frequency. The combination of daily newspapers and the development of the electric telegraph enabled the reading public to get the latest news quickly from around the world. Daily newspapers published later editions on the same day containing the latest information.

Fourthly, although circulation figures are hard to come by, the circulations of newspapers increased as they became cheaper to buy in a growing market for reading material caused by an expanding population and rising literacy. For example, the *Birmingham Journal* had had a weekly circulation of 2,500 in the 1830s, but by the 1870s the *Birmingham Daily Post* had a daily circulation of 30,000.

Politics and the Press

The emergence of modern political parties was a key development in the nineteenth century. Newspapers generated and sustained local party support between general elections and connected local parties to the national leaders. Through editorials, newspapers provided a running commentary on current affairs and reiterated the key themes of party identity.

Conservatives emphasised their attachment to the constitution, the monarchy, House of Lords and the Church, while Liberals trumpeted free trade, reform and removing discrimination against Protestant Dissenters and Catholics. Newspapers often carried the same reports of local events, so their political inclinations were crucial in differentiating themselves from their rivals and attracting and retaining a regular readership. The Conservative *Derby Mercury* was popular with the county's clergy due to its staunch defence of the established Church of England.

It was no coincidence that newspaper editors and proprietors were often prominent figures in local politics. Robert Kellie Douglas (1785-1855), editor of the *Birmingham Journal*, was a leading member of Attwood's radical Birmingham Political Union in the 1830s. The co-proprietor of the *Birmingham Daily Post*, John Jaffray (1818-1901), and its editor, John Thackray Bunce (1828-99), were part of the Liberal elite, including Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914), which dominated Birmingham politics in the 1860s and 1870s. Sebastian Evans (1830-1909)



Newspapers played an important role in current affairs, increasingly holding MPs to account. *The House of Commons, 1858*, by Joseph Nash.

used his editorship of the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* to promote a more progressive brand of Conservatism in the 1860s.

Despite the development of modern political parties, Victorian political life began locally. There were many locally elected bodies, including town councils, improvement and highway commissions, poor law guardians and, after 1870, school boards, which became party battlegrounds. Newspapers not only provided extensive coverage of these local elections, but performed a vital public service in closely scrutinising and reporting the meetings of the town council and other local bodies. By providing reports, newspapers gave the public the information to hold politicians to account and assess their performance.

MPs and the Press

The nineteenth-century representative system was far from democratic and the right to vote at parliamentary elections remained restricted. Only after the Third Reform Act of 1885 did a majority of adult men possess the vote. Yet although MPs and Parliament were not democratically elected, they were forced to be increasingly responsive to public opinion after 1832. Newspapers allowed MPs to be held to account, but also enabled them to communicate with their constituents. As MPs were well aware, verbatim reports of parliamentary debates formed an astonishing proportion of nineteenth-century newspapers. When speaking in the House of Commons, MPs were not only speaking to their colleagues, but also to the larger newspaper-reading public.



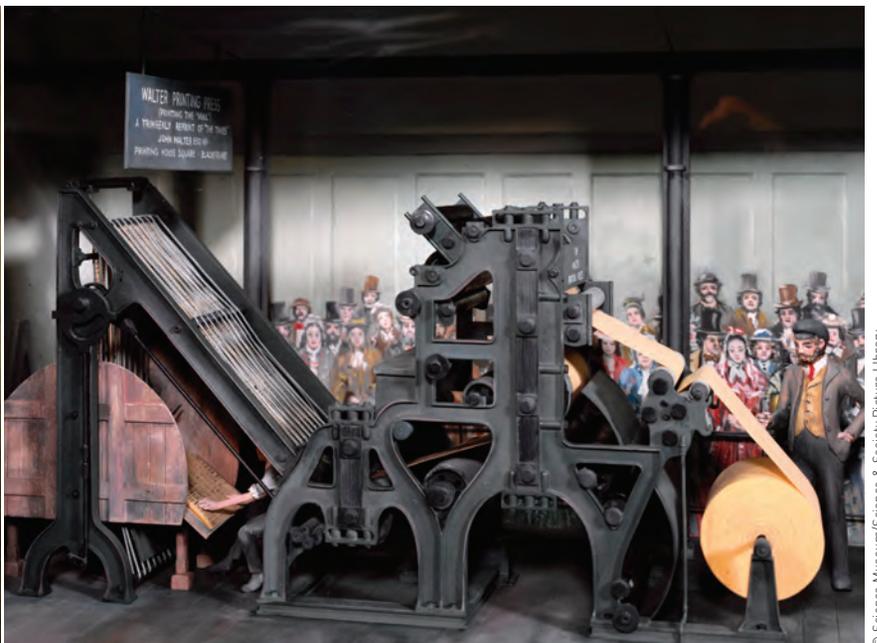
John Thackray Bunce, Editor of the *Birmingham Daily Post*, by William Thomas Roden, c. 1878.

MPs were not simply party delegates, but were expected to represent local interests. In a period of regionalisation, towns and localities were strongly associated with particular trades, such as Birmingham and metal products or north Staffordshire and pottery manufacture. MPs were under pressure to defend these local economic interests in Parliament and newspapers provided a perfect medium to publicise their activity to constituents. For instance, in the 1850s, there was a proposal to extend local taxes to coal mines, which was strongly opposed by Derbyshire's extractive industries. Through public meetings, presenting petitions, parliamentary speeches, deputations to lobby ministers and membership of select committees, local MPs successfully resisted the attempt, and their efforts were reported in the local press.

At election time, MPs used the press to defend their parliamentary record, explaining how they had voted on key issues and defended local interests. Their public speeches on the hustings at the election nomination were reported in local newspapers, while their published letters or addresses provided another means to appeal to local electors. In this way newspapers amplified other forms of political communication, such as public speeches, spreading them to a wider audience.

Political Campaigns and the Press

The Victorian era was distinguished by political campaigns such as the anti-slavery movement, the Chartist agitation for democratic rights and the Anti-Corn Law League's promotion of free trade, which drew their strength and energy from urban Britain.



Repeal of newspaper taxes drove developments in printing technology. Diorama of Walter rotary printing press, precursor of the modern newspaper press.

These political movements regarded an official newspaper as essential for three reasons. Firstly, to create and sustain a collective identity among movements that were often localised and divided over strategy and leadership. Secondly, through spreading information, newspapers would educate and mobilise public opinion, putting pressure on politicians and Parliament. Through newspapers, political activity, such as petitioning, or public meetings, could be organised and co-ordinated into a coherent campaign. Thirdly, newspapers were essential to counter the misleading reporting of the London-based press, such as *The Times*, which was far from representative of national, as opposed to metropolitan, opinion.

As well as the local press, campaigning newspapers were also widely circulated and read in the West Midlands. Many working-class artisans, including Staffordshire potters, preferred to read the Chartist *Northern Star* in the 1840s, which better reflected their radical opinions, than local Liberal or Conservative newspapers.

Change

Newspapers created local political communities by providing information about politicians, elections and policies, promoting party organisation and political activity, and allowing politicians to communicate with a broad public. By the late nineteenth century, new London-based daily newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* transformed the British press, which was increasingly dominated by a small number of national titles with mass readership. ●

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Further Reading

Many early newspapers are available to readers through subscription to www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk or library access to *19th Century British Library Newspapers*.

Lucy Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Clarendon Press, 1985).

Aled Jones, *The Powers of the Press: Newspapers, Power and the Public in Nineteenth-Century England* (Scolar Press, 1996).

Donald Read, *Press and People, 1790-1850: Opinion in Three English Cities* (Edward Arnold, 1961).