Mythologies of Cultural Decline and Aspects of The Newspaper Industry

Tit Bits for ever! with true fame allied,/ The people’s paper, and the peer’s true pride.

Peter Rawlings

Friedrich Nietzsche’s nostalgia was less for the aristocratic, or even heroic, more for the primeval and primitive, with all their fascist anticipations. “Of all writings I love only that which is written with blood,” Nietzsche’s Zarathustra pronounces, adding “that everyone can learn to read will ruin in the long run not only writing, but thinking too.” This “blood” is only that “spirit” which once “was God, then . . . man, and now it is even becoming mob” (67). Further invective is directed at the “Market-place,” because “there begins the uproar of the great actors and the buzzing of the poisonous flies” (78). For Nietzsche, the concepts of the market and the “state” shelter those “peoples and herds” subjecting culture to the brutal requirements of the masses (75). These “superfluous people,” who “acquire wealth and make themselves poorer with it,” “vomit bile and call it a newspaper” (77). By the mid-1880’s, when Nietzsche was writing, democracy, the masses, newspapers, and the threat to culture had become a familiar collocation for the besieged critics of all things modern. For Gustave Le Bon, whose The Crowd did much to popularise the categories of the “mass” and the “crowd:”

the claims of the masses are becoming more and more sharply defined, and amount to nothing less than a determination to destroy utterly society as it now exists, with a view to making it hark back to a primitive communism which was the normal condition of all human groups before the dawn of civilisation (16).

The press, which “formerly directed opinion,” now humbles “itself before the power of crowds” (150); it has “become a mere agency for the supply of information” and “had renounced all endeavour to enforce an idea or a doctrine” (151)

Shortly after Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Matthew Arnold expressed similar sentiments, if less hysterically:

. . . we have to consider the new voters, the democracy, as people are fond of calling them. They have many merits, but among them is not that of being, in general, reasonable persons who think fairly and seriously. We have had opportunities of observing a new journalism which a clever and energetic man has lately invented.
It has much to recommend it; it is full of ability, novelty, variety, sensation, sympathy, general instincts; its one great fault is that it is *feather-brained* (Arnold, ‘Up to Easter’ 638-639).

This is the first recorded use of the phrase “new journalism,” that “new” being all but an expletive, for some, by this stage of the nineteenth-century (as in “the new woman,” and so on). W. T. Stead was Arnold’s “energetic man;” he took over as editor of *The Pall Mall Gazette*, an evening newspaper already noted for its innovations, in 1883. Stead drew heavily on the two major press reorientations of William Randolph Hearst (1863-1951) and other editors, such as Joseph Pulitzer (1847-1911), in America: these involved a radical movement from political analysis to a focus on personalities and scandals, and changes in presentation designed to make newspapers quicker and easier to read. Hearst began his career with the San Francisco *Examiner*; in 1895, he took over the New York *Journal*, later accumulating many other titles, and trebled its circulation. For many, the nadir of American newspapers came in the 1880’s and 1890’s, the years of the “yellow press” and Hearst’s battle with Pulitzer’s *New York World* in an inflationary spiral of sensationalism and political demagoguery. This battle spread “death, dishonor and disaster all over page one, while crime, vice, trials and gossip were used as fillers” (Jones, *Journalism in the United States* 429-430). Hearst “realized that the interest in crime and sex was universal,” and “crime, preferably sexual and criminal trials . . . . now featured on the front page” (Kobre 48, 66). Some headlines from the *New York World* of the 1880’s and 1890’s help illustrate its agenda:

- Love and Cold Poison
- A Bride but Not a Wife
- Victims of His Passion
- Baptized in Blood
- Duke Meets His Doom

The English press rarely scaled these heights, or plumbed such depths, but as Stanley Morrison, one of the great historians of the press has it, *The Pall Mall Gazette*

had its witty paragraphs and causerie. . . . [it] sponsored the interview, forthwith denounced by the old stagers, as an outrage on the private life of the individual. . . . The reader of London morning newspapers had never seen that humble but vital aid to quick reading, the “cross-head,” until Stead used it (283-284).

On the journalistic side, innovations related to “an increased emphasis upon news as against opinion and commentary,” but such news tended to be
“snippety,” and often trivial, and lacked the guidance necessary to help its readers understand, or even to follow it. The new journalism concentrated on what the Americans had called long since “the human interest story”.

If “the ‘new journalism’ meant less politics, it also meant more ‘sensation’ and more ‘sport,’ the staples of the popular nineteenth-century Sunday Press” (Lee 121). Unsurprisingly, Le Bon denounced “modern papers” in “which a maximum of news is sandwiched between light articles, society gossip, and financial puffs” (151).

Stead responded to Arnold’s attack in two articles published in 1886. Writing in language which would have been barely comprehensible to the likes of Nietzsche and Arnold, Stead vaunted both a commitment to the masses, his idealised view of them at least, and his sense of political responsibility. In this way, he sought to counter not only Arnold’s arguments in “Up to Easter,” but those sustained more penetratingly in Culture and Anarchy. The function of the newspaper, he argued, was “to give utterance to the inarticulate moans of the voiceless” by letting “light into a dark place;” and he saw this as “almost equivalent to the enfranchisement of a class.” For Stead, “such a newspaper”

would indeed be a great secular or civic church and democratic university, and if wisely directed and energetically worked, would come to be the very soul of our national unity (“The Future of Journalism” 670, 678).

In ‘Government by Journalism’, Stead not only acknowledged the “power of the Press” (654) but tendered it as “a substitute for the House of Commons:”

The Press is at once the eye and the ear and the tongue of the people. It is the visible speech if not the voice of democracy. It is the phonograph of the world. . . . it must be obvious even to the most careless observer that the Press has become to the commons what the Commons were to the Lords. The Press has become the Chamber of Initiative (656).

Elements of Stead’s premises resemble Nietzsche’s, but his conclusions are altogether different. For Stead, a positive feature of the “democratic age” is that the “population . . . is able to read;” in this environment, however, the power, and thereby the responsibility of the journalist, is immense: “the editorial pen is a sceptre of power, compared with which the sceptre of many a monarch is a gilded lath” (661).

Arnold invested in “right reason” as fostered by “culture,” “the pursuit of perfection,” for salvation (Culture and Anarchy 69, 162). In particular, he believed that “the idea of perfection as an inward condition of the mind and spirit is at variance with the mechanical and material civilisation in esteem with us” (49):
Plenty of people will try to indoctrinate the masses with the set of ideas and judgments constituting the creed of their own profession or party. . . . but culture works differently. It does not try to teach down to the level of inferior classes. . . . It seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere; to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light (70).

Such vagaries were not for a Stead who, effectively, regarded newspapers as the sole culture, religion, and form of political influence and control available for the masses:

We have to write afresh from day to day the only Bible which millions read. . . . The newspaper—too often the newspaper alone—lifts the minds of men. . . . into a higher sphere of thought and action (663-664).

Conceded was the extent to which in the “new journalism” nothing “can ever get itself accomplished nowadays without sensationalism” (672) but:

As an instrument of culture, taking culture in Mr. Arnold’s sense, as familiarity with the best thoughts expressed in the best terms by the ablest men, the Press has many and glaring faults, but for the common people it has no rival (673).

Stead and Arnold, in their polarised positions, are emblematic of two conflicting analyses of culture in fin de siècle England: the former celebrated the apparent reconfiguration of power, control, and influence the press seemed to typify; the latter constructed and attacked what it identified as decline, degeneration, feminisation, and other forms of emasculation:

Fundamentally, what failed in the late Victorian age, and its flash Edwardian epilogue, was the Victorian public, once so alert, so masculine, and so responsible. Compared with their fathers, the men of that time were ceasing to be a ruling or reasoning stock; the English mind sank towards that easily excited, easily satisfied, state of barbarism and childhood which press and politics for their own ends fostered, and on which in turn they fed (Young: 187).

The nineteenth century had seen three great Reform Acts—1832, 1867, and 1884—which eventually enfranchised all males over the age of 21 (women had to wait for 1918 and 1929). In 1870, Forster’s Education Act established, for the first time, a national network of state schools in what many have regarded, however erroneously, as the dawning of education for all. Each Act was intensely controversial: the few, and especially those such as Matthew Arnold who saw themselves as caretakers of the past
and custodians of the future, feared that a literate, voting many would swamp their jealously guarded culture.\(^4\) Arnold held that only he, and certainly not Stead and the newspapers, could "stem the common tide of men's thoughts" and save "the future... from being vulgarised, even if it cannot save the present" (Culture and Anarchy 52).

For Arnold—as for Thomas Carlyle, John Ruskin, Thomas Hardy and later, D. H. Lawrence, among others—"faith in machinery" was the "besetting danger" (Culture and Anarchy 49). As early as 1829, and in ways that anticipate Arnold's critique and engender its very terms, Thomas Carlyle had written that "were we required to characterise this age of ours by any single epithet, we should be tempted to call it, not an Heroical, Devotional, Philosophical or Moral Age, but above all others, the Mechanical Age:"

Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangements, for institutions, constitutions—for Mechanism of one sort or other, do they hope and struggle (444).

Parallel with the progression of Reform Acts was the development of the modern newspaper industry and the professionalization and extension of journalism:\(^5\)

The increasing and public self-consciousness of journalists and journalism in the midcentury and after and the growth of a profession of journalism in the period highlight the confrontation between the hegemony of the clerisy and the competing ideologies of emergent capital, electorate, and literacy, which are significantly yoked by Arnold with the New Journalism (Brake 16).

The press, in all its manifestations, typified in some quarters the hazards of mechanization and mass production; it became the location of anxieties over the political entailments of democracy, literacy, and the commodification of news. The *locus classicus* for a later statement of these anxieties is *Culture and Environment*. There, Leavis and Thompson bewail the arrival of the machine and what they see as its cultural impact:

The great agent of change, and from our point of view, destruction, has of course been the machine—applied power. ... Moreover, the advantage it brings us in mass-production has turned out to involve standardization and levelling-down outside the realm of mere material goods. Those who in school are offered (perhaps) the beginnings of education in taste are exposed, out of school, to the competing exploitation of the cheapest emotional responses; films, newspapers,
publicity in all its forms . . . . all offer satisfaction at the lowest level (3). 6

Both the concrete power of the press, and its metaphorical reach, informed contemporary comments.

Who has not heard of Mount Olympus—that high abode of all the powers of type, that favoured seat of the great goddess Pica, that wondrous habitation of gods and devils, from whence, with ceaseless hum of steam and never-ending flow of Castalian ink, issue forth fifty thousand nightly edicts for the governance of a subject nation (Trollope 165).

For good or for ill, industrialisation and the press were inextricably linked; as Alan J. Lee has written, “only the steal railway rivalled the newspaper press in the Victorian estimation of the progress of civilisation” (21). One contemporary commentator, at least, had no hesitation in connecting the press with other features of the industrial age, and in situating these innovations in the context of the 1832 Reform Bill:

In the half-century between the first Reform Bill and the last the development of the press was enormous. . . . The abolition of the Stamp and the Paper Duty, the advent of the railway and the cable, and the progress of the art of printing, contributed materially to the expansion of journalism (Taylor 14).

Trollope’s flourish appeared in 1855, the year in which stamp duty was finally abolished; by then, the press had long moved from being merely a carefully controlled organ of government information to its role as not only a news medium but the agent of its production and control. The press had become the talisman of mythologies of cultural decline which remain potent in our fin de siècle. The contention of this paper is that the discourse of a Romantic critique of industrialisation and modernisation deployed by Nietzsche, Arnold, and the rest has tended to mask the fundamental political determinants of their respective positions. Relevant here is Jürgen Habermas’s rather neglected The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.

Habermas maps the shifting function of “publicity” within a broader framework of the development of notions of the “public” and the private. His particular focus is on transformations in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries—the mercantilist period, broadly—involving the development of local, national, and even nascent international markets, and the withering of monarchical and aristocratic power as trade, and eventually industry, displaced land-based wealth. Central to all these processes, Habermas believes, are the various mutations of the press in the changing public realm:
The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people coming together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people’s public use of their reason (27).

The “principle of control that the bourgeois public opposed to” existing rule was “publicity,” the “claim to power presented in rational-critical debate,” and it “was intended to change domination as such.” The “public’s understanding” of the private use of reason was guided specifically by such private experiences as grew out of the audience-oriented... subjectivity of the intimate family’s conjugal domain. Historically, the latter was the source of privateness in the modern sense of a saturated and free interiority (28).

The family sphere had become differentiated from the “sphere of social reproduction” once market economies developed; or once, that is, “commodity exchange burst out of the confines of the household economy.” Crucially:

The polarization of state and society was repeated once more within society itself. The status of private man combined the role of owner of commodities with that of head of the family.... The doubling of the private sphere on the higher plane of the intimate sphere... furnished the foundation for an identification of these two roles under the common title of “private” (28-29).

The political role of the modern press, as the means by which public opinion is both mediated and formed, stems from the emergence of coffee houses in the seventeenth century and, in the eighteenth century, that whole panoply of periodicals (such as The Tatler, and The Spectator, among others) which constituted a new critical realm in the public sphere. By these means, “the control over the public sphere by public authority was contested and finally wrested away by the critical reasoning of private persons on political issues” (29). This new ‘public realm’ was consanguineous with the bourgeois family, itself always already imbricated in the fabrication of subjectivity, interiority, and the notion of individual psychology.

The prime factor, in all senses of the word, was the printed word, especially in its journalistic and novelistic form; the newspaper and the novel can be regarded, in fact, as twin-born. By 1750, “the ‘great’ public that formed in the theaters, museums, and concerts was bourgeois in its social origins” (43): earlier mutations of a “public”
associated with the courts and aristocratic society in general were becoming extinct. Bourgeois culture was invented, rehearsed, and refined in this period. It circulated in the theatres and was fostered in the intimacy of the printed word, especially in the media of letters, moral weeklies, and the novel. Bourgeois "individualism" has been a best-selling fiction; its novelistic cradle, itself manufactured by John Locke in the empirical tradition, is, therefore, highly apposite. "Subjectivity," for Habermas, "as the innermost core of the private, was... oriented to an audience." Letter-writing was the vogue of the eighteenth century, and many of these were intended for publication at their inception:

Thus, the directly or indirectly audience-oriented subjectivity of the letter exchange or diary explained the origin of the typical genre and authentic literary achievement of that century: the domestic novel, the psychological description in autobiographical form (49).

What novels such as Pamela and Clarissa (over which the whole of Europe wept) celebrated was "humanity," or, rather, that humanity produced in the conjugal sphere, now mapped onto society in its division of the "private" and the "public," reproduced in endless novels and, later, banked by Arnold. Habermas:

In the form of this specific notion of humanity a conception of what existed was promulgated within the bourgeois world which promised redemption from the constraint of what existed without escaping into transcendent realism. This conception's transcendence of what was immanent was the element of truth that raised bourgeois ideology above ideology itself (48).

In an old-fashioned coup d'etat, the spoils went to those who could occupy the post office and the broadcasting station; in the eighteenth century, the bourgeoisie ceased possession of the epistemological foundations of reality by passing off "realism," in the novel, as the real thing. "The reality as illusion that the new genre created," Habermas argues, "received its proper name in English, "fiction": it shed the character of the merely fictitious" (50). When this metamorphosis is situated in antecedent traditions, the astonishing power of the legerdemain becomes clear.

John Locke, for want of others, presided over one of the greatest paradigm shifts in the Western philosophical tradition:

Let us then suppose the Mind to be, as we say, white Paper, void of all Characters, without any Ideas; How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store, which the busy and boundless Fancy of Man has painted on it, with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of Reason and Knowledge?
To this I answer, in one word, From *Experience*: In that, all our Knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself (104).

This is the fabric of bourgeois truth, the stuff of its reality. What Locke voids, what he erases in order to arrive at his “white Paper,” is a quite different conception of reality. As Ian Watt has expressed it:

By a paradox that will surprise only the neophyte, the term “realism” in philosophy is most strictly applied to a view of reality diametrically opposed to that of common usage—to the view held by the scholastic Realists of the Middle Ages that it is universals, classes, or abstractions, and not the particular, concrete objects of sense-perception, which are the true “realities” (12).

The legitimating ideology of the pre-modern “Middle Ages,” within a feudal structure, had little need of later demarcations of the private and the public. What it did require was a system of thinking that would rationalize God and the monarchy: hence its use of earlier conceptions of transcendent truth. Bourgeois power, and its displacement of the aristocratic within a context of market economics and industrial production, was secured as part of a two-move process: Watt’s “particular, concrete objects,” could become the basis of reality only because of the empirical localization of truth and knowledge; the trick though, and one Arnold still managed to perform, was that, paradoxically, of universalizing the local, of offering the synthetic and temporary as somehow essential and permanent. The novel has been of inestimable value in this chicanery. By 1869, Arnold can peddle the faded wares of bourgeois liberalism as (his emphases) “real thought and real beauty; real sweetness and real light” (69).

Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* is a manifesto for the conservation, indeed the calcification, of a bourgeois ideology of individualism whose illusions include(d) ideas of responsible freedom, benevolent paternalism, opportunity, and all the other usual suspects. His interest was not in protecting any culture as such, but in perpetuating that culture which encoded (encodes) a bourgeois ideology predicated on a richly concealed set of exclusions and privations. The sensibility first developed in the coffee houses of Europe thrived later in a new “critical sphere” whose material was the printed word. This critical sphere had a vital role in the synthesizing of a bourgeois sense of identity constituted by notions of interiority, privacy, exclusion, and ownership; all of these, subsequently, were to become part of Arnold’s cultural founding discourse. Hence, partly, Arnold’s recoiling from machinery and the externals, and his stifling—in so far, at least, as the burgeoning “masses” were concerned—opposing of “publicity,” and what he saw as its mindless cultural corollaries, to the inner, the seclusions of high culture and power. Such a discourse became imperative not because this “critical sphere” took on the role of political commentary and intervention—that,
after all, was the means by which the bourgeois culture Arnold sought to preserve was produced—but because from at least the mid-nineteenth century on, there were yet further reconfigurings of the public sphere and its relation to the private.

Put crudely, the second phase of industrialisation (from about the 1830’s) involved steam power and a consequent intensification of a factory system that entailed urbanisation:

The nineteenth-century newspapers were key instruments of urbanisation, providing not only the advertising forum that made new institutions like department stores possible but also providing a community identity that holds a city together when it was no longer a face-to-face community (Schudson 42).

The masses and mass production arose together, along with those new forms of cultural identification and circulation so loathed by Arnold: the press, popular fiction, football, and the rest. History was repeating itself, but the experience was far from farcical: teleologically, the final cause for the eighteenth-century critical sphere was the storming of the Bastille; if the masses were allowed to develop such a critical sphere, then the consequences would be imponderable yet terrifying. Ultimately, railings against “publicity” towards the end of the nineteenth century, together with all the anguished pronouncements against industrialisation and modernisation, belied deeper fears. Publicity—whose outward manifestations can be construed not in terms, say, of the traditional press and the art novel but in those of “new journalism,” and popular culture in general—was not simply a threat against “privacy,” but against the space itself and the right to construct and define it. The burghers of Europe had wrested such a right from their courtly and aristocratic masters; now, the proletariat might occupy itself with similar manoeuvres. Those who rejoice over the collapse of the Berlin Wall might ridicule such an analysis as a redundant recuperation of Marx’s dialectical materialism; it so happens, of course, that such ridicule has a profoundly conservative effect of the existing power structure of any given society. This realisation is important for any attempt to understand the conflict between Stead and Arnold; it also helps to explain why the anarchy envisaged by Arnold turned into the “sweetness and light” of Tit-Bits and the Daily Mirror (Culture and Anarchy 69).

It was in the interests of the culturally conservative, who were also the beneficiaries of the dominant ideology threatened by it, to attack all manifestations of the so-called “new journalism.” Arnold, for example, had no quarrel with the old journalism, typified by such newspapers as The Times. As Alan J. Lee has expressed it:

the golden age of the press was a part of the ideology, whereas the “new journalism,” in its most advanced and dynamic form, was not. Hence it is not surprising to find the “new liberals” in caustic denunciation of the popular press of their time (41).
Lee's observations, on the evidence of Le Bon, also hold for France:

The old staid and influential organs of the past, such as the Constitutionnel, the Débats, or the Siècle, which were accepted as oracles by the preceding generations, have disappeared or have become typical modern papers (151).

Analogously, and much earlier, Walter Bagehot had intoned the virtues of "a really sensible press" that could argue "temperately after a clear and satisfactory exposition of the facts;" as it was, "newspaper people are the only traders that thrive upon convulsion:"

Now a man who spends his life in stimulating excitement and convulsion is really an incendiary (4: 71, 72, 76).

The attack on "new Journalism," however, in a stratagem that is almost a thing of beauty, managed to create enemies whose function was that of regenerating the conservative forces against which they were nominally aligned. The targets of their attack, more often than not, were what they saw as the sensationalism of the press from around the 1880's and on, its concentration on local, individual, and transient events and people. Newspaper interviews, along with embryonic forms of investigative and revelatory journalism, were regarded as a wholly illegitimate infringement of privacy. T. P. O'Connor, who moved London's Evening News into a new journalistic mode and had few qualms about such infringements, held that:

No one's life is now private; the private dinner party, the intimate conversation, all are told. If this kind of thing goes on, say the critics of modern journalism, we shall before long be in the same plight as America (429).

Here, necessarily, the "critics of modern journalism" are using privacy to guard his bed-fellow, secrecy, that essential accessory for all exploitative political systems existing under the banner of liberalism. The reverse effect of the outrage against publicity was not only its inadvertent protection of privacy, but a renewed sense of the importance of secrecy. The popular press found itself colluding in the discursive formation of scandals and secrecy the function of which was to imply their existence, legitimate their authoritative protection (and, thereby, authority itself), and substitute the distractions of fabricated news for the political realities. James Macintyre, arguably, has a reach beyond his grasp when he writes of the "decoy:"

Much has been heard lately of something called New Journalism. . . . its main features seem to be the glorification of the personal, the unveiling of all secrets
and scandals of diplomacy and courts, and the utilisation of ingenious schemes which serve primarily as an advertisement and subordinately as a decoy to prospective material advantage (599).

Politicians—increasingly, as celebrities and, eventually, even stars of a kind—became adept at mobilising and manipulating the new realm of publicity. Publicity, with its glimpses of the “inner,” implied a complexity not extended to the mass, which was endlessly construed as merely an affair of the external, as being without seclusions, interiorities and, therefore, power. Such ascriptions were part of the whole process of rendering the mass, and its media, impotent.

For many commentators, serious political analysis, indeed news itself, was an early casualty of this rush to what could easily be consumed and quickly evacuated; but as we shall see, that was not only extremely convenient for, but a function of, the dominant ideology. The rhetorical space in which the hosts of high culture accommodated newspapers for the masses had been bequeathed to them by John Locke and company and, indeed, recently vacated by the said hosts themselves. The bourgeoisie, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, modelled its culture on aristocratic and courtly remains; the latter being positioned as a small, highly elite, and rarefied set of cultural practices under threat from below. For that bourgeoisie, the continuing process of borrowing permanence for a temporary culture under siege from the future now involved the relegating of all things empirical to the domain of the barbaric; it thereby repeated much more vigorously the cultural fissure of which it was itself a product. As part of this cultural fissure, the press and popular fiction appropriated and extended elements of bourgeois cultural grammar. The “sensationalism” of the press originates in those faculties, the senses, through which alone, Locke had averred, knowledge could be acquired. “Individualism,” the predicator of bourgeois liberal identity, itself a re-working of antique forms of heroism, had mutated into a burgeoning form of the star system as reporters concentrated on the construction of “celebrities.” Similarly, bourgeois prosperity, like that of the tabloid press, has always been contingent on a culture of fashion and disposability entailing, thereby, the endless need for renewal. Criticised at the end of the nineteenth century, then, were modern forms of what had previously constituted bourgeois ideology. One crucial difference, by comparison with the earlier formation of the bourgeoisie and its media of cultural circulation, was the scale of the operation. It suited its critics to identify the scale as the reason why the masses had become politically and culturally (within the framework of the high ground now claimed by the liberals) oblivious. That scale, together with the homogenisation of the masses into some threatening yet ignorant force, was (is) one of the finest self-protective fictions in the whole bourgeois repertoire. It prevented, at least, the construction of a critical sphere within, or co-extensively with, the mass public sphere.
Strychacz has argued:

Tactily or... quite consciously, some variation on the theme of mass culture... has been used to fashion cogent but flexible definitions of literature whose specific characteristics are organized around what they oppose (3).

By the 1880’s, if not before, the reactionary bourgeois liberals were able to identify, secure, and oppose themselves against that popular culture of the masses which they had in no small measure constructed. Popular culture began to prosper because it was not high culture, the reverse also being true; politics was aligned with the latter rather than with the former. Those trading in high culture maximised its value by talking up its scarcity, imminent decline, and likely disappearance; elsewhere, on the popular side, there was a carnivalesque revelling in the apparent abundance of the cheap and temporary. Of incalculable importance, then, is the extent to which Stead was wrong, and Arnold right, about “new journalism.” The absence of political analysis, and the distractions of all the other tittle-tattle, seemed to result in people who were not just “feather-brained” (Arnold, ‘Up to Easter’ 639) but anencephalous. In this context, Raymond Williams’ view is partial: he focuses on a “change in the political atmosphere,” after 1855, which resulted in the removal of politics from the primary place which it had in the cheap press of the first half of the century, and allowed the new emphasis on a more general news miscellany (218).

My emphasis is on the extent to which the depoliticisation of the popular press was less a consequence of some new consensus, more a rendering impotent of what could have been a proletarian “critical sphere.” In the press, news, and the imperatives of amusement, had displaced potentially radical forms of political commentary. The manipulation of readers, and the role of the press in the business of what Anthony Smith has called the “structuring” of reality, rather than the “recording” of it is now taken for granted; but as Smith implies, such processes gestated towards the end of the last century and, I would argue, as a prophylaxis for the possibility of a sharpened political consciousness:

The journalist has come to supply the needs of a large social machinery which defines the interim phases of reality... For a century now, the ideological content of journalism has lain in the way in which the media that contain it have tried to amass and approach their audiences (168-169).

In line with this, Lydia K. Commander can calmly state, in 1905, that the popular
press is the means by which “the great underlying mass of the nation, formerly unconsidered and untaught, are prepared for the duties of American citizenship” (155). Edwin Godkin’s interpellation of the “reading public, in our democracy today” as having “the increasing incapacity for continuous attention” appears to have met with little resistance and, indeed, to have been accepted with alacrity by liberal critics alarmed by the prospect of a political crowd (196). If John Carey’s interpretation of the eugenics movements is valid, less abstract forms of imposed passivity were under consideration:

Dreaming of the extermination or sterilization of the mass, or denying that masses were real people, was . . . an imaginative refuge for early twentieth-century intellectuals (15).

Kennedy believed that “the quarter of a century which lies between 1855 and 1880 may be said to constitute the golden age of the political journalist,” an age succeeded by one in which the political has been displaced by superfluous news and publicity (73). In 1855, Henry Reeve was able to write of “the mighty influence” of the press:

Not only does it supply the nation with nearly all the information on public topics which it possesses, but it supplies it with its notions and opinions in addition.

Adumbrating Stead, Reeve saw newspapers as “part and parcel of the representation of the country;” and “through it ministers can instruct and inoculate the nation” (477, 479, 482). Such a powerful medium needed a safe pair of hands; it also needed more than a small amount of political sterilisation. Handsome provision had been made for both necessities. Walter Lippmann, writing in 1922, shows that an analyst need not be a rabid post-structuralist in order to take Reeve’s “representation” beyond its apparent ambition:

How indirectly we know the environment in which we nevertheless live. We can see that the news of it comes to us now fast, now slowly; but that whatever we believe to be a true picture, we treat as if it were the environment itself. . . . what is called the adjustment of man to his environment takes place through the medium of fictions. . . . a representation of the environment which is in lesser or greater degree made by man himself (4, 15).

History was not to repeat itself after all. The “critical sphere” of the eighteenth century had bifurcated into high culture on one side, and a popular culture both refusing, and being refused by politics on the other. Politics was to become, for the masses, spectacular and spectral. The key function of ‘new journalism’ was that of
enabling the ridicule of Matthew Arnold, and a raft of lesser luminaries, a ridicule that reinforced the political distractions offered by the popular press and verified the greater sobriety, intellectual prowess, and sense of responsibility of those in power. Why? Modern historiography prescribes simple explanations of cause and effect rooted in attributions of pure greed on the part of those groups who dominate the rest. Without that proscription, it could have been quite simply noted that every one of the proprietors of those newspapers for the masses which Stead believed would be “the voice of democracy” became a peer of the realm and a millionaire (Stead, “The Future of Journalism” 656):

the English press was eventually controlled by a half-dozen “Press Lords:” Lord Northcliffe, owning the Daily Mail; his brother Lord Rothermere the Daily Mirror; Lord Beaverbrook, formerly Max Aitken, a Canadian, purchasing the Daily Express during the First World War; Lord Burnham owning the Daily Telegraph; Lord Riddell, controlling the News of the World; and Lord Comrose, with properties covering the important Berry group of newspapers (Dudek 133-134).

Telling indeed is Leavis’s juxtaposition of “machinery,” “applied power,” and “newspapers” (Culture and Environment 3).

Notes

1. From an anonymous book: Poetry, Press and the Pulpit. “George Newnes in 1887 started Tit-Bits, a magazine composed of human interest news and topical items written in such a way that no one above mere literacy would be incapable of understanding it” (Dudek 116).

2. See Jones for the most informative history of journalism in America.

3. On the “human interest story,” see Hughes.

4. Alan J. Lee concedes the unsound nature of the evidence but estimates that “after an initial faltering in the 1840s, the trend” in literacy “was steadily upwards, from a mean of about 61 per cent ‘literate’ in 1859, to 76 per cent in 1868. There then seems to have occurred a small plateau about 1870, before the final surge up to 97 per cent, in 1888” (33).

5. The National Association of Journalists was founded in 1886. On journalism and professionalisation, see O’Boyle and Elliott.

6. For a similar analysis, see Leavis’s “Mass Civilization and Minority Culture.”

7. Both Hearst and Pulitzer, in America, cynically exploited their readership (and boosted sales) by engaging in various political campaigns for industrial rights predicated on flimsy notions of “industrial democracy.” See Kobre 47.
Works Cited


