The British Press

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By Harold E. Scarborough

EVERY day some ten million copies of the nine London morning newspapers leave the presses, so that London alone supplies one newspaper for every fourth man, woman and child in the country. The aggregate circulation of the three afternoon papers is about 1,750,000; but their coverage is pretty well confined to the actual metropolitan area. There are about a dozen provincial newspapers which are leaders in their respective fields; but when these have duly been taken into consideration, the fact remains that for our present purpose London is not only England, but to a very large extent Scotland and Wales as well. To say this is in no way to deprecate the high standard of journalism to be found in British provincial cities; it is merely to recognize the centralization of the interests of a comparatively small and densely populated country about an urban agglomeration which contains one-fourth of its entire population, and which is at the same time its political, social, intellectual, financial and industrial capital.

The geography of the country serves further to confirm London’s supremacy. Three-fourths of England’s population live within five hours’ train journey from the metropolis. Eight hours takes one to Glasgow or Edinburgh. Even those newspapers which are printed only in London, therefore, can be laid on the breakfast tables of the greater part of England upon the morning of their publication; while those which print duplicate editions in Manchester or Glasgow can virtually blanket the British Isles.

The assumption would be pardonable that such concentration would tend to confer upon the London press a position of unique authority. The equation, however, is not so simple as that. In the last resort the authority of any influence upon public opinion must depend upon the factors by which the public has been conditioned to react to such influences. In Great Britain these factors are both complex and subtle, so that while the press is in no sense a subservient one, its power over the public mind is subject to modifications and limitations which do not directly correspond to anything in our journalistic experience.

We in the United States have had newspapers ever since we became a nation — indeed, for an even longer time. The freedom
of our press to express its opinions has been constitutionally guar-
anteed since the adoption of the Bill of Rights, since which time
we have never — not even during the World War — had a formal
censorship. The growth of our press, in other words, has been
coincident with our national progress: and we have tended to take
for granted its comparatively unhampered development.

In England, on the contrary, the newspaper made its appear-
ance as a new factor in an already old and settled community.
The very invention of printing had seemed to the Plantagenet
and Tudor kings something pregnant with the possibilities of
challenge to the established order. They lost no time in licensing
the printing presses, and in censoring their output; and the Eng-
lish newspaper, venturing timidly upon the seventeenth-century
scene, was faced from the very beginning with the official distrust
and suspicion which had accumulated for nearly two hundred
years. Freedom of the press in England was not established until
the third decade of the nineteenth century. After that, political
criticism became safe enough, although general criticism was
(and still is) strictly limited by drastic laws of libel.

For another seventy years the British newspaper continued to
be written for, and purchased by, the literate minority of the
population. One has only to refer to almost any Victorian
writer who visited the United States to discover the unconcealed
horror with which our journals of the forties, fifties, and sixties
were regarded. The evolution of the British newspaper into a
direct means of reaching the mass of the people really only got
under way in the decades between 1880 and 1900; and the tran-
sition then took place because the Education Acts of the seven-
ties had by that time produced an adult public which was
generally able to read and write.

For this new public new newspapers were created. They were
said to have been "Americanized" partly because in the decade
following 1890 a number of imported Americans did exercise a
considerable influence in brightening and modernizing the (then)
halfpenny papers; but more especially because the new journalism
was something unprecedented, strident, and altogether so with-
out the range of British experience as to deserve the transatlantic
label. At no time has this country produced what American
readers would regard as a duplicate of an American newspaper:
even the most flamboyant of the Americans who migrated to
Fleet Street could see that this would never do.
To this relatively jazzed-up competition the older and stodgier newspapers — written, as the late W. W. Astor rather pathetically proclaimed of his Pall Mall Gazette, “by gentlemen for gentlemen” — largely succumbed. Some of them simply put up the shutters; a few sold out to the opposition and now have their names (but little else) perpetuated in journals of wide circulation; and a mere handful survived. In the provinces the survival rate has been definitely higher than in London. But on the other hand the influence of both highbrow and lowbrow provincial newspapers (always with the one exception of the Manchester Guardian) has constantly tended to decline.

At present, then, one finds British newspapers fairly sharply divided into two distinct categories. There are those which appeal to the million, and those which appeal to the few. To appraise their relative influence is anything but an easy task — if only because there exist so few standards of definition of the term “influence” itself. Both the popular and serious newspapers are certainly capable of molding public opinion, at different times, into different directions, and by different methods. But neither the newspapers themselves, nor their readers, would agree upon the precise extent to which this force is exerted, or succeeds.

Of London's morning newspapers three are usually considered “serious” and six “popular.” Those in the first category are the Times, Daily Telegraph, and Morning Post, and between them they have less than 700,000 readers. (The first is understood to publish about 200,000 copies daily; the second sells just over 300,000; and the third about 150,000.) The six popular newspapers include the Daily Mail, Daily Express, and Daily Herald, each with circulations around the 2,000,000 mark; the News-Chronicle, with around 1,500,000; and two pictorial tabloids, the Sketch and Mirror, both in the large circulation class, but neither striving for nor achieving political influence.1 Of the three afternoon papers, the Evening News sells about 800,000 daily; the Star something over 600,000; and the Standard, which does not publish its circulation figures, probably about half a million.

All the morning newspapers achieve a nationwide distribution — despite the enormous gulf between the sales of the highbrow and lowbrow ones. They reflect the countrywide tendency in that seven of the nine are nominally more or less Conservative in

1 All the morning papers are sold at one penny, except the Times, which is twopence.
politics — the Herald being Labor and the News-Chronicle Liberal. Of the twelve leading provincial newspapers six are Conservative, two Liberal, and four independent. There are no provincial daily newspapers avowedly Labor in politics. But the Manchester Guardian, nominally a Liberal organ, is as a matter of fact usually sympathetic to the Labor cause; and despite its small total circulation is to be found on news-stands all over the country in much the same manner as are the London papers.

Generally speaking, it is fair to say that the three serious London newspapers already referred to influence public opinion more through their editorials (“leaders”) than through their news columns; while the four popular journals of widest circulation depend rather upon a highly selective and not invariably objective presentation of the news. At least tacit recognition of this fact is displayed by the newspapers themselves, in that the serious ones carry two to three columns of editorials daily, while none of the popular ones exceeds one column.

Without entering into the question as to whether the average American newspaper does in fact achieve that strict separation between “news” and “views” which practically all of them profess as an ideal, it may be said at once that not very much is heard in England of the ideal itself. Without exception the London papers present much of their news in a fashion which most American editors would at once reject as “too editorial.” I do not for a moment imply that this is necessarily done with any sinister motive; that it constitutes in any way a conscious perversion of the report of the happenings of the day; or even, indeed, that the British public does not prefer to have its news served up in this fashion. I merely record the undoubted fact that this is true in the case of the Times as well as in that of the Daily Mail.

There is to be considered the further fact that the technique of selection of news, its manner of presentation, and its display, differ widely in England and in the United States. The London editor must never forget that his newspaper will be read in Exeter as well as in Mayfair, in South Shields as well as in Shoreditch. He must therefore, to begin with, eliminate a great deal of news of purely local appeal. Manchester is not much interested in London’s local politics, nor Birmingham in a London murder without some unusual circumstances attaching to it.

But the London newspaperman must also remember that, over and beyond the style of writing which his particular journal
may favor, he must write for a public which on the whole does not prefer having its news too baldly or severely served up to it. The ideal of the American managing editor is usually that the outstanding facts in any news story should be condensed into the "lead," or first paragraph; and that amplification and explanation should follow. The first impression, at any rate, which is conveyed by this technique is one of unvarnished presentation of facts. There is not much room in a "lead," or in a series of headlines which are supposed to "tell the story," for the insertion of a tendentious bias. It can of course be achieved, but the exigencies of space and the hurry of production mitigate against it.

The British reporter and sub-editor are less compressed into this perhaps artificial convention. Headlines are not definitely stereotyped, either through the necessity that they should contain verbs, or that they should follow a particular typographical arrangement. The news articles themselves can be written without the inevitable "lead." Finally, the British tendency is against the signature of local news by the man who writes it: a fact which perhaps renders day-to-day inconsistencies a little less immediately apparent than they are when the reader, identifying particular fields of news with particular writers, is moved to reflect, "But yesterday Blank said just the opposite!"

Naturally, the serious papers devote more space, both news and editorial, to domestic and foreign politics than do the popular ones. The Times, Telegraph, Morning Post and Manchester Guardian obviously seek to present day by day a coherent and consecutive commentary on the major events of the world. The popular papers follow the lead of the others in supplementing news agency dispatches with those of their own correspondents in important capitals throughout the world; but the journals of wider circulation are far more "spotty" in their coverage. On the whole, the London newspapers carry less foreign news than do the New York ones; but, aside from the question of editorial policy, there are at least two more or less mechanical reasons for this. The scattered extent of the British Empire imposes upon them the necessity to maintain a large staff of correspondents in the dominions and colonies; while the fact that the London morning papers compete actively with many provincial ones mitigates against wide syndication of their foreign news services (with its consequent diminution of the terrific expense involved in gathering news from abroad).
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It is a curious fact that the three serious London papers and the Manchester Guardian are owned by men who personally are much less active politically than such “press lords” as Rothermere and Beaverbrook. The personalities behind these four newspapers figure comparatively little in the public eye, and there is consequently little tendency on the part of their readers to identify these newspapers with their proprietors.

By common consent the Times comes first in almost any listing of the British press. It is not only that the “Thunderer” is assumed to be as nearly as makes no difference the mouthpiece of the government; this newspaper has become a British institution. From its famous “agony column” to its stock market tables, from its law reports to its weather reports, it is viewed by many thousands of Englishmen with the same complacent acceptance as is bestowed on the Monarchy itself. Indeed, the proprietors of the Times (Major J. J. Astor, brother of Lord Astor and son of the late American-born W. W. Astor; and John Walter, of the famous family which owned the Times during the last century) have recognized this by voluntarily binding themselves only to dispose of their property after the proposed purchaser shall have been approved by an advisory committee consisting of the incumbents of five of the highest official and professional positions in the country.

The Times, like the other more serious papers, preserves the tradition of devoting its outer pages to classified advertisements; and of placing what would otherwise be its “front” page and its editorial page opposite to each other at the central fold of the paper. It is strictly departmentalized, so that year after year the same type of news appears in the same relative position. On its main news page it features cabled dispatches from its own excellent staff of foreign and Empire correspondents. It has only twice within living memory run a headline more than one column wide — a fact which perhaps gives as good a clue as any other to its general method of news treatment. A considerable latitude in the way of editorializing is permitted the staff; so that, for instance, although certainly no accusation could be brought of biassed reporting, regular readers of the Times could scarcely fail to notice that that newspaper’s Berlin correspondent is distinctly skeptical of the blessings of Hitlerism, and its Washington correspondent of the advantages of the “New Deal.”

The professed editorial policy of the Times is one of general
support of the British government of the day. This fact alone—or certainly when coupled with the paper's unique position in British journalism—suffices to convince many people, both in England and elsewhere, that the voice of the Times and that of the Cabinet are indistinguishable. On questions of foreign policy this usually is the case. In the domestic field the rule is less invariable; and in particular, during the past year, the Times has tended to find the National Government's policy on taxation and monetary and financial matters rather too old-fashioned.

On specific international questions, indeed, practically the whole of the British press seems sometimes to speak with one voice. Thus, all the London papers are in favor of disarmament; of restoring international trade; of friendly relations with the United States; of the removal of tariff barriers; and opposed equally to fascism, communism, and Nazism. It is only when one comes to examine the methods by which the individual newspapers propose that these desirable goals should be reached that the reader realizes that "Orthodoxy is my doxy, my Lord, and heterodoxy is the other fellow's doxy." For instance, the Morning Post thinks that the more tariffs Britain imposes, the more quickly will the rest of the world lower theirs. The Manchester Guardian believes that the maintenance of free trade by Great Britain would have produced the desired effect.

On this specific question the Times, as might be expected, professes the viewpoint adopted by the Cabinet. One might irreverently characterize this as an apology for tariffs much in the vein of the servant girl's apology for her illegitimate baby: that it was only a very little one. And so with regard, for instance, to the disarmament question: the Times, in common with most of the rest of the press, feels it highly desirable that the nations should disarm, but holds that Britain has already done more than its share in that direction. And I am willing to place a small bet that if it seems necessary to the Cabinet to augment British armaments in the cause of disarmament, the Times and the rest of the nominally Conservative press will applaud.

A final explanation of the authority with which the Times speaks arises from its recognized status as a national forum. It is reasonably certain that if for any reason the Prime Minister, or the Archbishop of Canterbury, or any other leading national figure wishes to send a letter to the newspapers, he will send it first of all to the Times.
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To the right, politically speaking, of the Times stands the Morning Post. Its majority shareholders are the Duke of Northumberland (who three years ago, at the age of 18, succeeded his father to the title), Sir Percy E. Bates, and Captain the Hon. A. P. Howard. As befits a journal which has had the courage of very definite convictions for 160 years, the Morning Post tends at times to be a bit dogmatic in its present rôle as the organ of the extreme Tories. Although its news is excellently written and attractively presented, it is not quite so complete a newspaper of record as is the Times, and in my opinion at least derives its main appeal from its forthright editorial policy.

It is comparatively seldom that the Morning Post feels it necessary to render to democratic institutions or principles even the lip-service paid by some of its contemporaries. At various times many of its readers must have been sure that particular editorials were written in collaboration by a bluff country squire and an old-school dowager duchess. (Actually for some years many of the most entertaining ones have been the output of a charmingly gentle middle-aged Scotsman!) This outspokenness, which at least leaves not the slightest doubt where the Morning Post stands on any particular question, particularly commends this newspaper to the so-called "Die-Hard" Conservatives. One would thus expect it violently to oppose the National Government's Indian policy; to feel that a strong British navy is the best guarantee for peace; to be in favor of more and better tariffs; to detest socialism and internationalism equally; to maintain a guarded approval of fascism in Italy (not of Hitlerism in Germany, although the Morning Post itself is anti-Semitic); and to favor closer Anglo-French relations in view of the Continental situation. And in these various ways the Morning Post does, indeed, react.

The Daily Telegraph, the third of London's staid journals, has as its principal proprietor Lord Camrose, who, before his ennoblement in 1929, was Sir William Berry. In conjunction with his younger brother, Sir Gomer Berry, Lord Camrose also has heavy interests in the London Sunday Times and Financial Times; in a large chain of provincial newspapers; and in the great periodical publishing enterprise called "The Amalgamated Press." He is understood to take a keen interest in the development and policies of the Daily Telegraph; but since he does not court personal publicity the public knows little of what goes on
behind the scenes, tending to accept the D. T. as an independent
entity rather than as the organ of a particular millionaire.

The reputation of the Daily Telegraph is that of an ably-
produced, interesting, accurate and dependable middle-class
newspaper. Since they purchased the property a few years ago
from Lord Burnham (whose father founded the paper), Lord
Camrose and his brother have been gradually enlarging and
strengthening it; and, having reduced its sale price from twopence
to one penny, have succeeded in tripling its circulation. Its
conservatism is of a milder brand than the Morning Post's and
perhaps less official than that of the Times. Recently, both in its
news and its editorial columns, the Daily Telegraph has come out
as a big-navy protagonist; but it still gives general support to
the Government's disarmament policy. It likewise backs the
Government on India, on its tariff policy, and on most domestic
questions; while, like the Times, it tries to steer a middle course
between national isolationism and whole-hearted participation
in European affairs. In common with practically the whole Lon-
don press, it has but little use for fascism of any sort or kind;
and none for any movement designed to replace the present
British parliamentary system.

In considering the four popular newspapers one passes into
altogether a different category of journalism — into a world where
film stars are normally more important than statesmen; where a
crime passionel in Peckham will always drive a famine in Pekin
off the front page; where ladies undressed to the legal limit frolic
through the picture sections; where women do not have babies,
but only "happy events;" where human activities fall largely
into the headline categories of "sensations" or "amazing
scenes;" and where the world's doings are presented with the
bright inconsequence of motion-picture news reels.

That a considerable proportion of the purchasers of these
papers buys them because they offer to registered readers large
"prizes" and free casualty and sickness insurance is admitted
tacitly by all of them and explicitly by the Daily Express, which
with refreshing cynicism frequently gives an exact accounting of
how much it costs to keep up with the Joneses in this respect.
Twelve years ago the largest daily net sale in the country was
that of the Daily Mail, which then achieved the figure of a million
copies daily. The Daily Mail even then had an insurance scheme
on a modest scale. When it began offering greater inducements
the other “stunt” newspapers followed suit; and although two of them couldn’t make the grade and were bought up, the remaining three at length offered their readers virtually the same free protection as the Daily Mail against human uncertainties ranging roughly from twins to tonsillitis. Now three of them are close to the two million mark. All four print duplicate editions in Manchester, and the Daily Express prints in Glasgow also.

There is a good deal of interlocking finance in the capital structure of two of the groups; but for practical purposes it may be said that Lord Rothermere (the former Harold Harmsworth, brother of the late Lord Northcliffe) controls the Daily Mail and Lord Beaverbrook (the Canadian-born Max Aitken) dominates the Daily Express. Lord Rothermere also publishes the Evening News and Sunday Dispatch in London; a chain of provincial newspapers; and numerous other periodicals. The evening and Sunday editions of the Daily Express are the Evening Standard and Sunday Express.

The Daily Mail is generally considered as the pioneer of its type of journalism, having been founded in the nineties. Yet, curiously enough, it is now the only popular paper to adhere to the old tradition of reserving its first page for advertising. Apart from this idiosyncrasy its make-up is intensely modern, with jazz headlines and lots of pictures scattered throughout the letterpress. It is nominally Conservative, and certainly reactionary; yet it is forever going off on tangents of its own. At one time it will produce a violently Francophile tendency in its news and editorial columns; again, it will be isolationist. Today it will be berating the government for its failure to economize and reduce taxes; tomorrow it will call for holding India at any price, or for strengthening the national defense in a highly expensive manner. (It has just been conducting a campaign for a much larger air force.) Its politics are largely compressed into slogans such as “Hats Off to France!” “For King and Country!” “Down With the Squandermanniacs!” and “Come Off Your Perch!”

Withal, the Daily Mail is undoubtedly influential. Its financial ability to command “big” names; its technique of reiteration of pungent and easily-grasped argument; and the fact that it interests the average lower middle class reader who merely is bored by the serious papers—all these make it formidable. Its readers were not frightened by its dire predictions of financial collapse when the first MacDonald Government was being
formed; but they panicked in their millions when it announced the Zinovieff letter as a factual occurrence in 1924.

The Daily Express also is Conservative, but with Lord Beaverbrook’s especial and personal brand of conservatism. Its proprietor is a little man of daemonic energy: sometimes impish and Puck-like, sometimes devastatingly serious. His gospel is that of the self-contained Empire; and to that end his newspapers are intolerant of European entanglements, severely critical of the Locarno pacts, and contemptuous of what they term the weakness of the government’s tariff policy. In curious affinity with the Laborite Daily Herald, the Daily Express fights for a higher wage standard in England; and for an expansionist financial and industrial policy. In some ways Lord Beaverbrook is the ablest publicist in England today. You may laugh at him; but you will find that he has already hired David Low, a gifted Australian cartoonist, to do it better than you can. His Daily Express, like the Daily Mail, is sensational; but it prefers to amuse its readers rather than to make their flesh creep.

The Daily Herald is owned by Odham’s Press, but it is the official organ of the Labor Party and its editorial policy is subject to the control of the Trade Union Council. This newspaper was in low water until the financial resources of the great Odham’s publishing concern were utilized to modernize it and to swing it into line on competition and free insurance schemes: but now it has the largest daily net sale in England. As the Daily Mail tends to present its news as seen through the primrose-tinted spectacles of conservatism, the Daily Herald’s news columns reflect the red (or at least pink) hue of socialism. Editorialy it is internationalist and free-trade; a believer in disarmament; a violent opponent of fascism and Naziism; and a good friend of Russia and of the United States. The existence of 7,000,000 Labor voters in Britain provides a ready-made public for a Labor organ which is also a real newspaper: the Daily Herald fills the bill.

Lastly, there is the News-Chronicle—the organ, as someone rather unkindly said, “of the official Liberals whenever it can find out which they are.” Controlled by the Quaker family of the Cadburys, of cocoa manufacturing fame, the News-Chronicle nevertheless does for the Liberals what the Daily Herald does for the Laborites. It is internationalist but not socialist; and equally opposed to fascism and communism. Although a fervent supporter of disarmament, the News-Chronicle recently caused some
consternation by coming out strongly in favor of the most drastic possible interpretation of Britain's commitments under the Locarno pacts; but it remains very definitely a Left paper.

As I have indicated, each of London's three evening newspapers is published by a firm which also issues a morning newspaper (the Star, the third of the trio, being the evening edition of the News-Chronicle). Each follows fairly faithfully the politics of its morning edition—as do the Sunday newspapers published under the aegis of the dailies. There are several Sunday newspapers which appear independently; but only one of these—the Observer, owned by Lord Astor—carries any particular weight. This journal is independently Conservative in politics; and at a certain distance follows the Times in giving general backing to the government of the day.

Among the provincial newspapers the Manchester Guardian stands head and shoulders above the rest as a national, and indeed an international, force. Owned by the family of the late C. P. Scott, it is perhaps the chief organ of enlightened progressive thought in England. In its field it is almost as well known as the Times is in its own: it is, in the best sense of the terms, an intelligent, liberal, reasonable, and urbane newspaper, read as carefully by its opponents as by its adherents.

The cause of conservatism is well served in the provinces by the Scotsman of Edinburgh; the Birmingham Post; and the Leeds Mercury and Yorkshire Post. The Liverpool Post is a first-class Liberal newspaper; while among independent journals worthy of mention are the Glasgow Daily Record and Herald and the Liverpool Echo. None of these can hope to compete with the London papers in circulation or influence; but their local standing is excellent, and they represent communal forces.

Finally, there exist in England several hundred weekly newspapers. These appear both in the smaller country towns and also, curiously enough, in those sections of London which fifty or a hundred years ago were independent villages, and which still retain a certain local homogeneity. Like the American country weeklies, they deal largely with personal and local affairs; but, unlike the American ones, they concern themselves editorially scarcely at all with national or foreign politics, and thus constitute a negligible factor as regards effect upon public opinion. This once again merely serves to illustrate the inescapable dominance in England of the London daily press.