

Readers, rioters and rick burners: an introduction to the history of mass communication in Britain

People in Britain today spend a considerable amount of their time consuming a range of media products – books, newspapers, radio, television, films, videos, records, tapes, CDs, gameboys, iPods, computers and the range of new interactive technologies tied to the internet – which provide a continuous flow of information and entertainment. The centrality of the mass media in everyday life has led people to blame the media for a range of social ills. Whether it is increased violence in society, the growth of juvenile delinquency, football hooliganism, inner-city riots, terrorism, permissive behaviour, the decline of religiosity, falling educational standards, political apathy or any other social problem, we are ready to attribute ‘fabulous powers’ to the mass media. Complaints about the influence of the mass media are often underpinned by the assumption that this is something new. However, history shows that the emergence of every new medium of mass communication or popular amusement has been accompanied by great claims about the impact of the medium on the behaviour of men, women and children as well as on the values and mores of society.

The long tradition of complaint against the influence of popular media and entertainment forms in Britain has been documented by Geoff Pearson.¹ In the 1950s, concern was expressed about the corrupting and depraving influence of American comic book magazines and rock and roll music. In the 1930s, the worries were over the cinema which, according to cultural critic, F. R. Leavis, involved the ‘surrender, under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals’. One psychiatrist could assert in 1938 that ‘70% of all crimes were first conceived in the cinema’. At the turn of the twentieth century, the music halls were seen as encouraging lawlessness with their glorification of violence and immorality. The middle of the nineteenth century witnessed the ‘penny gaff theatres’ and ‘two penny hop’ dancing saloons criticized for peddling

immoral and criminal behaviour among the young. An editorial in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1851 stated:

one powerful agent for the depraving of the boyish classes of our towns and cities is to be found in the cheap shows and theatres, which are so specially opened and arranged for the attraction and ensnaring of the young. When for 3d a boy can procure some hours of vivid enjoyment from exciting scenery, music and acting . . . it is not to be wondered that [he] . . . then becomes rapidly corrupted and demoralised, and seeks to be the doer of infamies which have interested him as a spectator.²

At the end of the eighteenth century people talked of the harmful impact of newspapers with the depiction and discussion of villainy and depravity in their columns. The emergence of the first newsbook or 'corantos' at the beginning of the seventeenth century was greeted with charges that they demeaned the role of the writer. The concern can be traced as far back as the Middle Ages when the popular songs of wandering minstrels were accused of sowing dissent and spreading disaffection.

Fear of the mass media

The tradition of complaint is associated with the fear of the masses which has accompanied the growth of mass communication. The history of mass communication is in one sense a history of the fear of the masses. The masses – or those 'dirty people of no name' as the historian Claredon called them³ – become increasingly visible with the growth of the media and communication industries. Sorlin⁴ points out that 'mass' is a pejorative term. When added to other words it provides a deprecatory nuance. Thus mass circulation newspapers are full of trivia and gossip; mass art is cheap and lacking refinement and mass culture is aimed at satisfying the lowest common denominator. Intellectuals, moral guardians, politicians and those in positions of power have always been deeply suspicious of the people, the masses of society. This suspicion underlies their criticisms of the media. The growth of the mass media for intellectuals has been accompanied by cultural debasement; for moral guardians, it is the root cause of moral and spiritual decline and for politicians, it has sullied the conduct of politics by making them respond to what the people want rather than what is best for the nation.

However, the term 'mass' only came into usage in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, coinciding with the rapid expansion of the means of communication. The last decade of the nineteenth century witnessed the advent of silent films, the birth of the first mass circulation daily newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, and the development of wireless telegraphy which was to lead to the rise of sound broadcasting in the early twentieth century. These developments marked the beginning of what has been called the 'age of mass communication'. The reach of the broadcast, and subsequently the electronic media, particularly television,

expanded enormously in the wake of the economic and technological changes of the early twentieth century. The new capacity to reach a large, heterogeneous and geographically widely dispersed audience is seen as crucial to distinguishing a medium of *mass* communication. Thus only in the 1930s, when daily newspapers began to sell in their millions, annual cinema attendances reached 903 million and the number of households with wireless sets had risen to over 11 million, is it possible to talk of means of communication which truly reached the masses in Britain. The development of each new media, however, has extended the reach of the communication process. The terms 'mass communication' and 'mass media' are often used interchangeably. The use of 'mass communication' in the sub-title of this book is meant to indicate an interest in the media as part of the broader communication process in society. The media can be seen as particular institutions and structures with particular histories, well defined and narrowly delineated. But they are more than this – they are central to the nature and development of society at any given time.

The age of mass communication did not replace previous forms of communication. Communication is as old as society itself. In fact, without communication it is impossible to speak of society. The nature of communication has gone through many changes. Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi⁵ divides the historical development of communication into three epochs: the earliest period when oral communication was dominant, the print epoch and the electronic media. She argues that each form is important for the *way* in which it influenced *what* was communicated, *how* it was communicated, *who* was involved in the process of communication and in *whose* interests the process took place. The face-to-face nature of oral communication in which speaker and audience were both present was both 'very space bound' and 'highly time bound'. The emergence of a written culture changed the nature of communication by allowing the 'separation of the message from the producer and the producer from the audience' which meant that the writer, in contrast to the speaker, had much less power over how audiences would understand and interpret his or her message. The electronic media, particularly television, reconstituted facets of oral and written communication: face-to-face communication combined with a dislocation between communicator and audience. Sreberny-Mohammadi emphasizes that different forms of communication have not only changed notions of political leadership and social authority but also the way in which society comes to know, understand and evaluate itself. History shows that one communication medium does not simply replace another; it is added on and comes to pre-eminence as older forms change their function.⁶ Thus in order to understand mass communication, it is essential to know about the previous stages of communication.

The roots of the present epoch of mass communication are deeply entrenched in the evolution of the print industry at the end of the fifteenth century. Some would argue that they go back even beyond this period to the medieval era when the rituals of the Catholic Church, the mass and other religious ceremonies, acted

as a form of mass communication.⁷ However, the ‘Gutenberg Revolution’, which marked the arrival of print culture in Europe, is seen as a crucial advance in communication. Marshall McLuhan⁸ sees the arrival of print as the key to modern consciousness. It freed scholars from the time-consuming activity of copying out manuscripts by hand which was the essence of cultural production in the medieval period. The printing press allowed them more time to think and to question the world around them and, above all, share their ideas with a wider audience. The virtues of ‘public communication’ came to be extolled in opposition to the narrow self-interest of established authority, such as Church and State, that placed limitations on what could and could not be said or written. From the end of the fifteenth century, the growth of communication has in part been about the enlargement of the public space, the freedom of expression and action for individuals and groups. This role in the expansion and dissemination of knowledge brought the print media into conflict with established authority with its fear of the people and public opinion. Such fears, whether real or imaginary, resulted in attempts to control and regulate the development of mass communication.

Freedom and control

Traditional interpretations of the history of mass communication emphasize the role of the media in the struggle for freedom and democracy in Britain. The press is regarded as having gained its freedom from the British State and political interests in the middle of the nineteenth century with the repeal of the ‘taxes on knowledge’ (taxes on newspapers and periodicals which raised their price to put them beyond the reach of the vast majority of the British people). Following their repeal the press is seen as becoming a check on government – the ‘fourth estate’ – and by providing information and a platform for the discussion of public affairs newspapers furthered the growth of democracy in Britain.⁹ New media are seen as further developing the ways in which the media and communication industries contribute to the extension of democracy and freedom of expression and representation. The birth of the cinema and the wireless in the first half of the twentieth century and the emergence of television and the internet are all seen as expanding and deepening democracy and the democratic process.

This view of the development of the mass media as a steady and inexorable march toward more freedom has been challenged by those who see the communication process in terms of changing forms of control. They see the media as agents of social control in the hands of the ‘establishment’ or the ‘powers that be’ or a ‘dominant class’, which use them to manage and manipulate the growth of mass opinion and mass democracy to serve their ends. This analysis sees the middle of the nineteenth century not as securing the freedom of the press but rather as a change from State to market control of mass communication. James Curran¹⁰ in his account of the struggle for the repeal of the taxes on knowledge argues that this was the main objective of many of those involved in the campaign

against the press taxes. The stress was on the role the press could play in the engineering of social consent. The birth of the wireless was accompanied by similar concerns about the impact of the new medium on the mass of people. The government was wary of the power of the new medium to act as an instrument of propaganda and argued strongly against organizing broadcasting on the basis of allowing any private individual with sufficient funds to broadcast. It preferred that the new medium should be placed in trusted hands. The General Strike in 1926 proved that in 'the hands of experts and under firm political control, radio could give the government . . . a most powerful weapon'.¹¹ The fear of the masses led those in positions of power to see the media in terms of the role they could play in social control.

The conceptualization of the role of the mass media as being *either* the 'fourth estate' *or* 'an agency of social control' is an oversimplification. History shows that the role of the mass media at any time is shaped by a number of factors particular to the period under consideration as well as the medium under study. More detailed examination means that their role becomes more complex and qualified. However, central to the history of mass communication is an understanding of the countervailing pulls on the mass media as the representatives of the public, public opinion and the masses *and* as the agents of control exercised by the State and other powerful institutions in society.

Forms of censorship

The State and other powerful social institutions have intervened in a number of ways to shape what we see, hear and read. In the early days of print, the State exercised direct control over the medium. The Tudors introduced a system of pre-publication censorship and the licensing of printers which proved effective for much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The exceptions were the English Civil War which, with the collapse of political authority throughout the land, witnessed a vast outpouring of popular political literature, and the early years of the Interregnum when the State allowed considerable popular discussion, which was ended by Oliver Cromwell's dictatorship. Official censorship collapsed in 1695 but this did not see the complete disappearance of direct State intervention in the operation of the media. For example, the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) exercised rigid control over the content of what was shown in British cinemas in the 1930s and the Broadcasting Ban limited what the British public heard on television screens about the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Direct censorship was replaced by economic controls on the press and printed material which were introduced in 1712. Press taxation – or 'taxes on knowledge' – restricted the dissemination of news to those who could pay, the so-called 'respectable' elements of British society. However, these measures failed to crush the sales of radical papers and led the government to look for other means to combat the 'malignant influence' of the radical press which peddled 'doctrines

injurious to the middle and upper classes'. The approach of traditionalists, who sought more repressive measures, was overcome by those who saw the press and printed material as a means to secure the good opinion of working people. As one reformer stated in 1851: 'readers are not rioters: readers are not rick burners'.¹² From the 1830s, there was a mobilization of resources to capture the hearts and minds of working people. For example, the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK) published journals to 'train up the lower classes in the habits of industry and piety'.¹³ To assist these publications to compete more effectively with the radical press, the government had to free them from the shackles of press taxation which was phased out by the 1860s. The free market did what economic regulation could not. Within 20 years radical newspapers had virtually disappeared from this country. The new forces of competition increased the costs of newspaper production, and made the press more dependent on advertising. The change in the economic structure of the newspaper industry forced radical newspapers either to close down or become less political or turn themselves into specialist political journals selling to dedicated small audiences.

Less direct means to manipulate mass communication have also been used. The law has been regularly resorted to as a means of influencing the media. Criminal and seditious libel and blasphemy laws were used in the nineteenth century to muzzle newspapers. As late as 1925, leaders of the British Communist Party were prosecuted for remarks in their official newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, on the grounds that their 'language tended to subvert the government and the laws of the Empire'.¹⁴ The libel laws and the threat of libel have also been used by prominent individuals, notably Robert Maxwell, to deter investigation of their activities. Throughout the twentieth century, the State devoted more resources and developed new techniques to manipulate the information environment in which the media operated. While the big stick was always part of the government's armoury in dealing with the press, as well as other media, in the twentieth century more indirect means were increasingly used to manage the flow of information, including the introduction of secrecy laws and the expansion of the government public relations and propaganda apparatus to 'sell' information. The State has also exercised influence through the power of appointment. The Board of Governors of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) were always appointed by the relevant government department, as were the members of the regulatory bodies which have overseen the running of commercial television. The State's influence over the BBC is furthered by the fact that the finances of the organization are drawn from the licence fee which is set and collected by the government. The appointment of the secretary of the BBFC, established as a non-official body, was also subject to government approval. However, it is not always the case that the State's influence over the mass media is malign. British broadcasting developed the concept of public service which, as Paddy Scannell¹⁵ argues, has 'unobtrusively contributed to the democratisation of everyday life, in public and private contexts, from its beginning through to today'. The State played a crucial

part in the establishment of public service broadcasting: under its auspices, the BBC developed as a public service institution. It is also the case that the mass media have been, and still are, the site of political and cultural struggle between different factions within the British State. Throughout the history of mass communication, State involvement in the development of the mass media has taken a variety of forms.

Issues of control and censorship in the history of mass communication do not appear only as matters of State. The mass media often have not shown the same commitment to disclosure as the State has to restricting the flow of information. Within media organizations there has been conflict between owners and controllers and media practitioners. This is most acutely expressed in the history of the press where owners have interfered in the operation of their newspapers. The concept of editorial freedom has been advocated from the nineteenth century onwards to protect the newspaper editors and their staff from such interference but the struggle to enact the sovereign right of the editor to determine the content of the paper has had to be fought for.¹⁶ Self-censorship is also a theme of mass communication history. Journalists have always told the public only a small proportion of what they know. This is not simply as a result of the imposition of pressure from outside. Often fearful of offending powerful interests, journalists have censored themselves. Humbert Wolfe captured this inclination in a small ditty written during the inter-war years:

You cannot hope to bribe and twist
Thank God, the British journalist
But seeing what the man will do
Unbribed, there's no occasion to.¹⁷

Self-censorship was also an aspect of the British film industry. The BBFC was not imposed on the industry by the government – it was established by the industry itself. The history of mass communication is a history of changing forms of censorship, self-censorship and regulation. The growth of the media has to be seen in the light of the struggle between those who seek to extend popular access to leisure, information and entertainment and those who seek to control and regulate such access. The concerns and activities of powerful elites, news and information managers and moral campaigners, as well as the changing parameters of public taste and political acceptability, are an integral part of the history of mass media in Britain. However, censorship is only one factor that has shaped the evolution of mass communication in Britain.

Technology, commerce and audiences

Peter Golding¹⁸ describes the development of the mass media as the outcome of the growth of an industry and the evolution of an audience. They interact through what he describes as the 'supply and demand for two basic social communities: leisure facilities and information'. The study of the history of mass communication

must concentrate on the development of media industries and audiences, and their interaction. On the supply side, technology and economic organization are necessary for the growth of media industries. Different historical periods are distinguished by their technologies. The growth of the newspaper in the nineteenth century was driven by technical innovations such as the rotary press, which allowed the reproduction of more sheets per hour, and linotype, which enabled pages to be composed on a keyboard rather than by hand. The result was that more newspapers were printed more quickly, encouraging the rise of the mass circulation popular press. However, the relationship between technology and communication is not straightforward. Technology is often represented as having its own internal drive which determines the nature and content of what is communicated. Such a view ignores the social, economic and cultural developments that shape the application of media technology.¹⁹ How media technologies are adopted, adapted and institutionalized and by whom and for what purpose is essential in understanding the development of mass communication.

One important factor in shaping the application of media technologies has been – and continues to be – the economic and industrial organization of the mass media. Entrepreneurs, for example, have played a key role in the development and utilization of media technologies. They have reacted quickly to adapt technological invention to meet the demand for information and entertainment. From the early printing press, the mass media have developed as commercial concerns organized around capitalist methods, primarily motivated by the desire to make profit. McLuhan²⁰ says that the book was the first commodity manufactured under conditions recognizable as modern mass production. The expansion of newspapers relied on commerce and advertising – the extent of this dependence is illustrated by ads appearing throughout most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on the front page. The economic organization of broadcasting in Britain from the 1920s took a different form in the shape of the philosophy of public service. Based on public subsidy in the form of a licence fee for the ownership of radio sets, the BBC acquired the monopoly of broadcasting, rejecting the free for all that characterized the birth of radio in the United States. The distinction between the ‘commercial’ and ‘public service’ model of economic organization has been an important feature of the British media. The history of mass communication is intimately tied up with the growth of the media as industries and businesses. Mass communication involves the production of information and entertainment by industrial agencies operating under commercial or quasi-commercial considerations.

The demand for information and entertainment has propelled the growth of mass communication. Golding²¹ identifies several factors crucial to the stimulation of such demand: leisure time, affluence and cultural variation. The increase in leisure time has played an important role in increasing people’s consumption of media products. The provision of longer holidays, the decline in the number of hours at work, the improvements in the nature of work brought

about by technical change, and the drudgery of the process of industrial production have all provided people with more time, opportunity and incentive for leisure and recreation. The quality of such leisure varies for different sections of society.²² The ability to make use of the increased free time is a product of affluence. The amount of money individuals and groups have to spend is a crucial determinant of the demand for media products. But the ability of people to make use of the mass media, as well as their attitudes towards them, is shaped by a number of cultural factors. Literacy clearly has had an important role in the development of mass communication. However, it is not an essential pre-requisite for participation in the consumption of mass media. The radical working-class newspapers of the early nineteenth century, for example, were read out aloud to groups of illiterate people. Literacy does not guarantee people will read or find reading a pleasurable activity. The growth of a reading public which played a key role in the early development of communication was the result of education. The better educated tend to read more. The expansion of mass education following the 1870 Education Act acted as a catalyst to the expansion of reading and hence supported the growth of the British press, print and publishing industries.

Mass communication has played a crucial role in the social history of Britain. The growth of print in the sixteenth century fuelled as well as responded to the religious upheavals brought about by the Reformation and the intellectual needs of the Renaissance. In the seventeenth century the political conflict and ideological struggle which culminated in the Civil War in the 1640s created an environment which fed the demand for news and information as well as gave birth to the propaganda tract. The eighteenth century is associated with the growth of industrial capitalism, with its voracious need for business and commercial knowledge and information. The creation of industrial classes also saw communication act as a conduit for the development of class and group consciousness. Newspapers in the nineteenth century were organs of class and community interests. Whereas *The Times* and the other newspapers that constituted the 'respectable press' spoke for and to the rising middle classes, the 'radical' or 'pauper' press sought to articulate, reflect and empower the emerging working classes of Britain. Within the structure of class representation, the newspapers of the nineteenth century were the organs of the political factions that constituted the parliamentary or extra-parliamentary politics of the period. In the twentieth century, mass communication, in particular broadcasting, has been central to the growth of mass democracy, mass consumption and mass culture. But mass communication is also about what people do with the mass media. People throughout history have used the mass media to fulfil their dreams and desires and to provide their pleasures and pastimes. How the mass media have been integrated into daily life and how they have satisfied the needs and wants of their audiences – and helped them to make sense of the world around them – is an important aspect of the growth of mass communication.

One of the features of the development of the mass media from the perspective of their reception is the 'general move away from collective occupation of exterior

space towards a family grouping which has withdrawn to interior space'.²³ In other words, as the growth of the mass media has brought about the expansion of public communication, their consumption has increasingly taken place in the private sphere, primarily within the confines of the home. Newspaper reading, which in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries took the form of public spectacle, either through reading aloud to groups, in coffee houses, taverns or in the windows of newspaper shops, had by the end of the nineteenth century become an individual private activity at the breakfast table or on the train or tram. Similarly, radio came to be established in the home with the family as the site for listening, despite its origin as a technology that could cater to large crowds. Collective listening groups met regularly in the early 1920s to hear and discuss what was broadcast. Visual culture also developed in this way: cinema took working people off the streets where popular recreation had generally taken place prior to the twentieth century while television confined the mass consumption of the visual image to the domestic environment. The threat of the masses again can be seen as one aspect of this development – combating the 'mob' or 'multitudes' and their drunkenness, violent behaviour and rapacious sexuality are evoked in the domestication of media consumption. Domestic viewing, reading or listening have implications not only for the content of the mass media but also for the nature of public space and how it is constituted.

There is also the question of the 'mass' audience. As Raymond Williams notes, there are no masses but only ways of seeing people as masses. The audience for mass communication is not a homogeneous entity; it is fragmented and has changed over time. In particular, the growth of mass media has been in response to the needs of specialized audiences. Thus the history of mass communication is about the development of media which serve the interests of particular groups or classes in our society – the emergence of women's magazines or the Black press or the working-class press of the last century. Finally, there is a tension in the history of mass communication between the provision of 'information' and 'entertainment'. This is manifest with the roles of the mass media in acting as businesses and in serving the needs of the community. The balance between treating members of the audience as citizens, who must be provided with the information and education necessary for them to play a full and constructive role in the political and social process, and as consumers, who need to be entertained and encouraged to participate in the consumption of products which are made available through mass advertising, is central to tracing the growth of the mass media. For some commentators the cultural impact of the growth of mass media is of paramount concern. Mass entertainment has been accused of threatening to 'cretinize taste', blunting the 'discriminating powers of the mind' and being 'anti-life'. In this sense, mass communication has changed the ways in which people interact on a daily basis, how they make sense of the world around them and, as a result, how they come to terms with what is happening around them.

This book traces the development of mass communication from the social and cultural revolution brought about by the invention of printing to the present communications revolution, which promises – or threatens, depending on your perspective – to bring about as profound a change in our society and culture as print did in the sixteenth century. It outlines the expansion of the audiences, industries and technologies that have provided the basis for the development of mass communication. It explores the fears that have shaped the emergence of the mass media, examines the desires and needs of people that have been served by the expansion of mass communication and discusses how the mass media has represented and reflected the lives of ordinary men and women. In the beginning was the printed word.

Notes

Readers, rioters and rick burners: an introduction to the history of mass communication in Britain

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- 18 Golding, P. (1974) *The Mass Media*. London: Longman, p. 14.
- 19 See Winston, B. (1995) 'How Media Are Born', in Downing, J. *et al.* (eds), pp. 54–73.
- 20 McLuhan, M. (1962) *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, p. 125.
- 21 Golding, P. (1974), p. 18.
- 22 See Clarke, J. and Critcher, C. (1985) *The Devil Makes Work: Leisure in Capitalist Britain*. London: Macmillan.
- 23 Moores, S. (1988) 'Box on the Dresser: Memories of Early Radio and EverydayLife', *Media, Culture and Society*, 10(1): 25.

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- 16 Williams, R. (1980), p. 178.