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## The Aberystwyth/Leverhulme Trust British Press in WW2 project

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## Introduction

In 2011 Professor Tom O'Malley and myself, from the Centre for Media History at Aberystwyth University, were awarded a major Research Project Grant by the Leverhulme Trust for a three-year project: A Social and Cultural History of the British Press in the Second world War.

The Aberystwyth Centre for Media History is an interdisciplinary research centre based in the Department of History and Welsh History and the Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies at Aberystwyth University, Wales, UK. Its aim, since its launch in 2005, has been to integrate the two fields of history and media studies. This project was designed from the start as a means of combining humanities and social science approaches to this particularly significant episode in the history of both the British nation and the British media. The project team also included a full time research assistant, Dr Marc Wiggam, and two PhD students, Caroline Dale and Kris Lovell. It concluded its third and final year last September and we are currently pulling together the results.

This paper presents an outline of our project: what we were trying to achieve, and why; the methodological challenges we faced, and how we sought to overcome them; some of our principal findings and conclusions; and some of our plans for disseminating our findings to a wider academic and public audience.

## Project aims

The project's specific aim was 'to provide the first full critical study of the development and role of the British press in the Second World War'. In other words, we sought to explore the role of the press in both wartime political culture and wartime everyday life. We wanted to trace what was *in* wartime newspapers; how they were structured; what they looked like. We wanted to address how far newspapers retained their independence, or, alternatively, how far they were co-opted into the wartime state. We wanted to explore the role of newspapers in people's lives: *how* and for what reasons and with what expectations people read newspapers during the war. We wanted, also, to try to assess how changes in the relationship between the press, other media and society during the war influenced the development of communications in post-war Britain. We did *not* want to focus solely on institutions, or on individuals, or on one or two specific themes or problems. We set out to integrate the wartime press as far as we could into the wider context of contemporary cultural, political and social change at a key moment in the history of modern Britain.

Our principal reason for doing this was very simple: because no substantive history of the wartime British press exists, and because current scholarship is framed around a series of partial narratives only. This is despite the war coming at a time of growing wider interest in the role and function of the press, and the war itself representing a turning point in the history of the British mass media, that is, the end of the British newspaper press's centuries-long hegemony as a news and information medium, as they faced significant competition for the first time from broadcasting.

The British press on the outbreak of war in 1939 was by all accounts one of the most popular, diverse and sophisticated in the world.  In 1938 119 daily newspaper titles were published in Britain: that is, eight 'quality' dailies (two national, six provincial), six national 'popular' dailies, three London evening papers, and over twenty morning and over eighty evening provincial titles.  Eleven national and three provincial Sunday papers were also published, as well as innumerable local weekly newspapers, news magazines, periodicals, etc.  However, the war hugely disrupted the very conditions which had enabled the pre-war newspaper industry to thrive.  Thus, the war created, by all accounts, a demand for serious news—but, with newsprint supply during the war barely 20% of what it had been in the 1930s, the British newspaper itself was drastically shrunk in terms of pages by paper rationing.  The wartime press was, during the war, largely freed from the commercial pressures of advertising (since advertising space was itself in such short supply)—but its news content was subject to rigorous censorship.  Its readership was the highest ever recorded--but radio, for instance, for the first time was challenging its dominance in news provision.  However, no historian had ever taken time to explore and describe in detail just *how* the wartime press worked; what it looked like in its shrunken form; the extent and limitations of its autonomy (whether commercial or editorial); even the impact of the war on its relationship with its readers.  This therefore was the task we set ourselves.


**Project approach and methodology**

There were two strands to the project research: qualitative and quantitative.

With respect to qualitative (that is, historical and archival) research, we sought to conduct original archival research in the widest possible array of sources and archives.  We were intrigued by the common assumption among many historians that most of the relevant materials had either never been kept or had been destroyed during the war itself (e.g., in the London blitz, which had devastated much of Fleet Street).  We wanted therefore in part simply to establish what was available, and to read as much of it as we could.

As it turned out, we were able to collect a huge resource base in the form of research notes and digital copies of original documents from archives all over Britain that now runs to some 90 GB of data and that will provide material for both current and future research for years to come.  This includes a series of hard to find reports on the contemporary newspaper industry, circulations and readership from the period under review.  We have also compiled an extensive bibliography of contemporary printed works on the press, including diaries and memoirs of key figures of the time, as well as an extended bibliography of secondary literature

With respect to quantitative research (in this case principally newspaper content analysis), we set out to create a database of wartime newspaper content, to enable us to map both the characteristic content of wartime newspapers and changes to that content over time.  We were aided in this by the existence of two major surveys of newspaper content conducted immediately before and shortly after the war, by Political and Economic Planning in 1938 and by the Royal Commission on the Press in 1947.  However, we wanted to design our own particular content analysis methodology that would be not just fit for our particular purpose but also transferable to other projects in the future.

Thus we came up with a two-part coding framework.  First, we assigned 'content codes': we coded for content type, using content categories adapted from and broadly comparable to those used by the Royal Commissions on the Press  1947 and 1974), with ten main content categories (Fig. 1), and

up to ten sub-fields for each main category (Fig. 2). Second, we assigned 'field codes': we coded for key additional information: from editorial slant and 'war content' to foreign or regional coverage (Fig. 3). We then integrated both sets of information onto a single coding sheet, used to record every article that appeared in the newspaper in our samples (Fig.4).

Fig. 1

Fig.2

### Content analysis: Content codes

| | |
|---|---|
| 1.0 | Home news |
| 2.0 | External news |
| 3.0 | War news |
| 4.0 | Other news |
| 5.0 | Feature articles |
| 6.0 | Regular features and columns |
| 7.0 | Regular feature pages or sections |
| 8.0 | Other editorial space |
| 9.0 | Advertising and commercial |

❖ Adapted from Royal Commission on the Press 1947/1974 content categories

### Content codes: sub-fields

**1.0 Home News**
- 1.1 Political news
- 1.2 Social news
- 1.3 Economic news
- 1.4 Law, police, crime
- 1.5 Military news
- 1.6 Accidents
- 1.7 Personalities
- 1.8 Other home news

**7.0 Regular feature pages/sections**
- 7.1 Sports
- 7.2 Arts and entertainment
- 7.3 'Women's interest' regular features
- 7.4 'Men's interest' regular features
- 7.5 Children's page
- 7.6 Religion
- 7.7 Picture features
- 7.8 Any other regular feature content not included in 5.0, 6.0 or 7.0

(etc)

Fig 3

Fig 4

### Content analysis: 'Field codes'

| | |
|---|---|
| • War content? | manifest - latent - none |
| • Editorial treatment? | supportive - critical - n/a |
| • Human interest? | yes - no - n/a |
| • 'Sex interest'? | yes – no – n/a |
| • Illustration | photo - cartoon – map - line drawing - etc |
| • Authorship | staff - guest contributor - news agency – etc |
| • Country | (15 countries and 13 regions specified) |
| • British Empire? | yes - no |
| • Region of Britain | (9 broad areas specified) |

| | Total article area | Illustration area | Text area |
|---|---|---|---|
| Column area | 0.00 | 0.00 | 0.00 |
| Page # / Total page # | | | |
| Headline: | | | |
| A - Content code | | | |
| B - War content? | 1 - Manifest | | |
| C – Editorial treatment | 1 - Supportive | | |
| D – Human interest? | 2 – No | | |
| E – 'Sex interest'? | 2 - No | | |
| F - Illustration | 0 - Not applicable | | |
| G - Authorship | 12 - No byline | | |
| H - Country | 1 - UK | | |
| H2 – Empire? | 1 - Yes | | |
| I – Region (home news) | 10 - Wales | | |

As regards the samples, unfortunately this part of the project needed considerable scaling back from our original intentions. We had hoped to analyse at least eight to ten different titles. In the event we had to settle for three major middle-market titles: the *Daily Express*, *Daily Herald* and *News Chronicle*, that together comprised some 50% of the wartime newspaper readership of Great Britain. We also had to cut back our sampling to one constructed week per half-year for selected half-years (the second half of 1939 and first half of 1940; the two half-years for 1941 and 1943; and the second half of 1944 and first half of 1945), which allowed us still clearly to map change over time through the war. Even with just three titles, and a reduced sample, the content analysis coding took three members of the team three days a week of work over just over a year. (In total they coded some 30,000 separate news stories.) We were happy that by this means we were able to combine

quantitative and qualitative research within a single methodology, and generate SPSS data both for content type (for instance home news, war news, sports coverage, editorial content, etc.) and content character (including positive/negative coverage, manifest/latent war-related content, author details, national or regional representation, human interest, and even the old favourite of the Royal Commission on the Press, 'sex content').

Figs. 5 and 6 show two examples of the data generated. Fig.5 shows the proportion of newspaper content devoted to the ten major content types in the three newspapers over the course of the war. Fig. 6 shows the change in newspaper space given to one particular type of content (in this instance content code 8.2: Other Editorial Space/ Correspondence) at different points in the war.
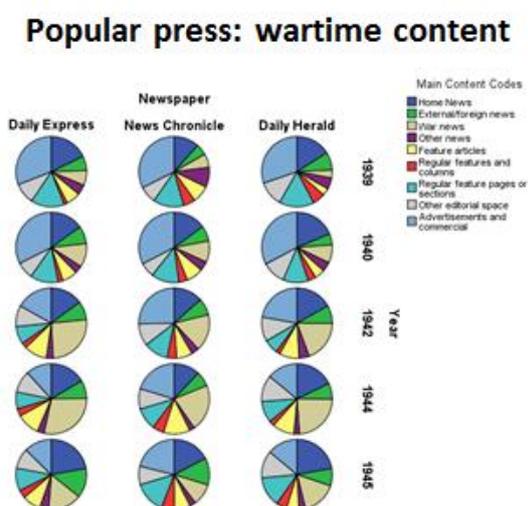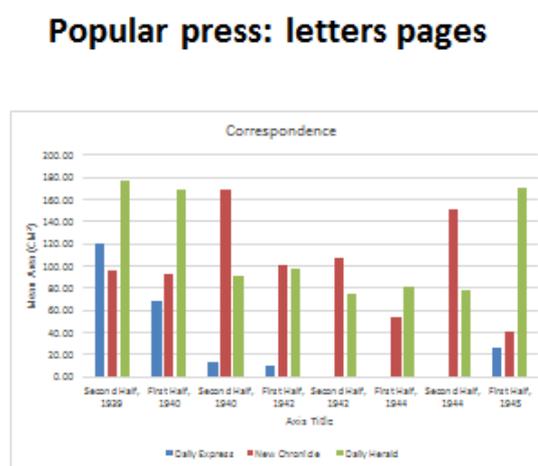
Fig. 5

Fig. 6.



## Project findings

We are currently still working on the data collected over the course of the project. However, early observations point to some important conclusions, some of which confirm what we had anticipated, others of which were more unexpected.

Thus, for instance, our archival research has confirmed the extent to which wartime newspapers operated under stringent newsprint rationing regulations; however, we also found that the newspaper industry as a whole acted very much as a united front, sharing resources, pooling journalists, and acting in concert against government to protect its own interests.

We have also found that wartime newspapers in our sample appear to have compensated for their drastically smaller wartime pagination by featuring broadly the same range of content, and even a comparable number of stories as in peacetime, but typically at considerably shorter length. The 'essence' of the inter-war newspaper, and the essential character of specific newspaper titles, thus remained preserved through the war, if in highly synoptic form. Newspapers were thus able during the war to serve as markers of normality (in wartime parlance, newspapers 'carried on'), as well as to protect their individual brand identity by maintaining their most characteristic elements. However, our content analysis appears to confirm contemporary observations that newspapers were typically more 'serious' in wartime, featuring rather less 'human interest' content and rather

more hard news (including foreign news stories) than in peacetime.   (Meanwhile, 'sex content', that much commented on feature of inter-war popular newspapers, appears to have virtually disappeared from middle-market titles during the war.)

However, we have found that simplistic assumptions about the character and extent of press censorship in wartime Britain simply do not hold.  Formal press censorship was limited, specific, and based on consensus: it was marked by a distinctly light touch approach for the most part, and only caused problems when the boundaries of that consensus were considered to have been breached.  It was focussed almost exclusively on issues of military and national security and never covered press criticism of the government, which remained throughout the war vigorous and often trenchant.  Press self-censorship, on the other hand, was voluntary, considerable, and marked above all by an overriding—indeed patriotic--belief in the need to win the war. This is evident above all in newspaper war reporting, which was at no point either 'impartial' or 'objective' as we would understand those terms today.  Conventional notions of the wartime press as alternatively a compliant arm of the state or as an independent 'fourth estate' thus both need significant revision.

Perhaps our most significant finding, though, is that the very parameters of historical discourse about the British press—whether in wartime or through the twentieth century as a whole—are misleading.  First, the very concept of a 'national' press in this period is a deeply problematic one.  Not only was the provincial/regional press still highly influential, but the London press had very uneven distribution around the United Kingdom. (Thus for instance, the *Daily Mirror*, the 'national' newspaper that regularly receives most attention from historians of the war and to which is typically assigned the greatest national wartime political influence, had, we have found, an almost negligible readership in wartime Scotland.)  Second, there is still a huge amount of research to be done into the readership of newspapers: that is, who read newspapers, which parts of the newspaper they read, and what they got from them.  We had assumed that collating wartime newspaper circulation figures and readership data would be relatively straightforward.  Instead, we found that 'readership' itself was a highly fluid concept, with an extraordinary range of contemporary data (not all of it easily comparable) available, but little of it explored or subject to close analysis.  And again, simplistic assumptions about readers believing what they read, or uncritically accepting a newspaper's political standpoint, need considerable modification: newspaper reading was a cultural act as much as an information process, informed by a very wide range of political and societal factors.  We feel that our work in these areas has in fact only just begun.


**Project outputs**

Our project findings will be publically disseminated through a number of publications and associated outputs.  We will be publishing (with Oxford University Press) a full-length historical monograph provisionally entitled *The British Press in the Second World War*, co-authored by Dr Nicholas, Professor O'Malley and Dr Wiggam, hopefully in 2017.  We also hope to publish a series of journal articles on different aspects of the project.

We will be depositing our full content analysis datasets in the Aberystwyth University electronic research repository Cadair, ensuring there is a complete permanent database of our quantitative research findings available to researchers.

We will also be launching a website, 'The British Press in WW2', later this year.  This website will include full details of the project itself, including its history, its aims, examples of our content

analysis methodology, and our principal findings.  It will also, we hope, provide researchers with key information with which to navigate for themselves the history of the British press during the war, for instance, a timeline of the British press in wartime; essential facts about the wartime press industry, including wartime paper controls, censorship policy and practice, circulations and readership; and key biographical, bibliographical and archival information.  We hope to add to and develop the website further in future years as an essential historical research resource for students and scholars in this field.

This project was always been about asking questions, not necessarily finding answers.   But the deeper the project team has gone in our research, the more important we realise it is to have a detailed history of the British press in the Second World War, that describes the framework in which the wartime press operated as well as the various things individual newspapers did, and sets it in the context of what newspaper reading meant to the British people.  We hope our work will go some way to fulfil this aim.

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