

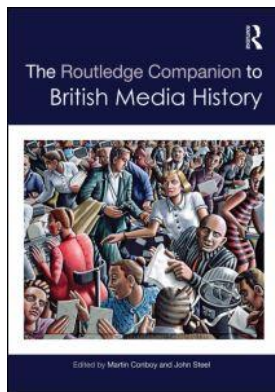
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### Doing media history

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# 3

## Doing media history

The mass media, historical analysis and the 1930s

*Kevin Williams*

### Introduction

Historical accounts of mass communication are criticized for their media-centric focus. They are often directed at the examination of the content and organization of a specific medium. This focus means media history tends “not to illuminate the links between media development and wider trends in society” (Curran, 2002: 135). The historiography of the mass media is primarily concerned with “parallel histories of individual mediums which only fleetingly acknowledge the existence of other media” (Nicholas, 2012: 381). The failure to consider them as a whole has resulted in “fractured and incomplete understandings of the historical role of the media” (Curran, 2002: 135). It excludes the complex interactions and exchanges between different media at different stages in their growth (Bastiansen, 2008). It neglects the wider social context in which the media operate and media technologies are developed. Calls have been made for integrated histories of the mass media which highlight the interplay between media and address the social context within which this takes place. Considerable problems confront media history of this kind.

Sian Nicholas (2012) has already examined some of the obstacles to producing an integrated history of the media. She describes the problems that arise from the different characters of media, the different ways they are addressed, the different modes of engagement with their audiences and their very different archival records. Nicholas (2012: 382) argues that what is required is “simply to note the existence of other media; to contextualise developments in one mass medium in relation to other media; and/or identify a range of media responses to a particular issue.” Her case study documents the interrelatedness of the media during the interwar years by identifying the extent and nature of the connections between individual media practitioners and between media institutions. She describes how the convergence of style, language and personnel led to “an increasingly sophisticated and integrated mass information and entertainment culture” (Nicholas, 2012: 387). She argues that ‘intermediality’ led to the emergence in the 1930s of a ‘common culture’ which was underpinned by an entertainment-driven mass media community.

Nicholas demonstrates how an integrated approach helps us to understand the historical role of the media in a more complete sense but her discussion raises

questions about what we mean by interconnectedness. This chapter asks what types of connections and interactions constitute interconnectedness. Like Nicholas it draws on the example of the 1930s<sup>1</sup> to discuss whether the interrelatedness of the media adds up to anything more than a superficial and shared exposure to media technologies. In particular does interconnectedness form a common media culture? Some of the methodological and conceptual issues presented by the sheer magnitude of the challenge that confronts historians in documenting interrelatedness are touched on. The chapter begins by exploring a problem that confronts every media historian – the relationship between media history and history. Understanding the historical context within which we want to study the media presents an interpretative challenge to efforts to document and describe the nature of mass communication.

### Media history and history

Integrated media history requires an understanding of the historical conditions within which media texts and messages are produced and received. The approach taken to a particular historical period will lay down a framework for understanding and evaluating the performance, practice and power of the media and ultimately shape the interpretation put forward to account for their role. That the past is a matter of dispute and only accessed through the concerns of the present are established components of the historian's analytical tool kit. Recent trends in historiography suggest that reproducing an accurate picture of what happened in the past is impossible. What we have are different accounts produced by different groups with different concerns and at different times. This poses a particular challenge to media history. How a period in history is conceptualized shapes the effort to describe and discuss the role of the media. Dissimilar and sometimes contradictory evaluations confront the media historians with interpretative difficulties. This is apparent with the 1930s.

Historians agree that the 1930s were a “peculiarly heightened and potentially transformative moment” in British history (McKibbin, 1994: 518). There is a relatively high degree of scholarly consensus that British society underwent dramatic and far-reaching change. Disagreement exists over the nature of the change. It was a matter of controversy amongst those who lived through the 1930s and has remained ever so. Many historians<sup>2</sup> and much popular history<sup>3</sup> represent the decade in terms of a society bitterly divided between the haves and have-nots, between classes and peoples, Left and Right, a nation at war with itself. Images of hunger marches, unemployment, idleness, poverty, slums, ill health, political extremism, the rise of fascism, civil war in Spain and appeasement illustrate these divisions. Revisionist historians<sup>4</sup> challenge this interpretation, painting a different picture. They draw attention to the uneven distribution of unemployment and hardship around the country; it was concentrated mainly in the old industrial areas of the North, Scotland and Wales. Outside these regions the 1930s were boom years. They witnessed the birth of consumerism, the development of the suburbs and technological innovations such as the motor car, washing machine and gramophone which changed most

people's lives, many would say for the better. For those in work the 1930s were not 'wasted years'; they were years of prosperity. Longer holidays, shorter working hours and higher real income are seen as more typical of the experience of ordinary British men and women.

Both these perspectives are partial; as Andrew Thorpe (1992: 126) notes, the 1930s "have suffered too much from people using them for their own purposes." Interpretations of the decade have changed as the time that has elapsed since the period has grown (Smith, 1998). According to John Baxendale and Chris Pawling (1999) "the ever changing constructions of the 1930s have reflected the conflicts and concerns of the world that came afterwards." The 1930s throw up "so many paradoxes about Britain's experience of the depression years that it is possible to credibly put forward interpretations which are wholly at odds with each other" (Smith, 1998: 1). With so many constantly changing accounts, accessing the 'real' Thirties is far from straightforward if at all possible.

Matters are further complicated by the part the media play in constructing the past. How they report and represent what happened are important sources of historical information. Accounts produced at the time by *Picture Post*, the Documentary Film Movement, the newsreels and popular newspapers amongst others are drawn on to piece together the history of 1930s. How historians make sense of competing and contradictory media reports is often shaped by the emphasis they place on their sources of information. There is a hierarchy of sources with a tendency to attribute more attention and credence to certain accounts. There is an emphasis in some quarters on media with the greatest reach. Historians justify their focus on the press, or wireless or cinema in quantitative terms, neglecting the role of smaller but perhaps more influential media in shaping the style and nature of representation. Within these broad categories greater reliability is accorded to factual forms and media of record. This conforms to the conventional approach of a discipline wedded to high politics and the socio-economic conditions that demarcate its practice. It is reinforced by the commitment made by news organisations to produce 'objective' accounts of reality and the 'first rough draft of history'. The practical advantages of the detailed archival records of established organizations such as the BBC and *The Times* further attract the historian. Integrated media history runs the risk of giving preference to particular media. For example, despite the tremendous demand for newsreels in the 1930s, which drove the legendary rivalry between the companies and their camera workers, there is relatively little examination of their content and how they shaped the output and practices of the rest of the media (see Aldgate, 1979). This reflects not only the disposition of historians and the problems of accessing archives and material but also the concerns as to whether newsreels were real news or part of show business.<sup>5</sup>

### Interconnectedness

Focusing on the interconnectedness of media institutions and personnel neglects the media's interaction with other social and political actors. The media on a daily basis work closely with representatives of the State. The interaction between the State and

the media not only shapes institutional practices and output but also frames perceptions of the media as an interrelated whole. In the 1930s the media were seen as a catalyst for political tension and a threat to the authority of the State. This was expressed in a number of ways such as Baldwin's outburst about the 'power without responsibility' of the press barons and the Committee for Imperial Defence's warning about the 'incalculable significance for political stability' of the wireless. The State had to adjust to new problems of political, social and cultural management in the era of mass democracy. The threat posed by mass communication, however, was matched by the opportunity the media presented as a means for managing public and political discourse and moulding popular taste.

A range of formal and informal mechanisms of information control were embedded in British society in the 1930s. The coming of sound provided an impetus for the extension of the ability of the British Board of Film Censorship (BBFC) to censor what people saw in British cinemas. In 1937 the President of the Board could boast that "there is not a single film showing in London today which deals with any of the burning issues of the day" (Street and Dickinson, 1985: 8). Pressure from government, politicians and local authorities diminished the capacity of the newsreel companies to convey independent and informed opinion (see Aldgate, 1987). The BBC exercised caution and self-censorship; for example, "independent expressions of views" on the European situation were discouraged (see Scannell and Cardiff, 1981). Even the press suspended its critical faculties on some of the pressing issues of the day: the non-reporting of King Edward VIII's affair with Mrs Simpson and the Abdication crisis as well as the reluctance of many newspapers to criticize Nazi Germany for fear of offending government are examples (see Cockett, 1989). The process of embedding censorship and control across the media draws attention to the close connections between the media and the State.

During the 1930s the relationship between the media and politics was institutionalized. In the wake of the Great War various government and political organizations had developed apparatus to 'sell' information. On a daily basis they sought to manage the environment in which the media gathered news and information. Press officers, public relations advisors and information officers became a feature of government in the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> Government used mass media to pioneer innovative techniques of propaganda. For example, the Empire Marketing Board (EMB), set up in 1926 to promote trade with the Empire, employed documentary filmmakers such as John Grierson to communicate its message. Such organizations fuelled the interaction with the media. BBC officials served on the publicity committee of the EMB and the man who headed up the Board went to the BBC as head of publicity. Filmmakers such as Grierson moved between government, media and corporate sectors to obtain the backing for their documentaries. In the case of the press and later broadcasting, the daily interactions between media practitioners and government personnel were institutionalized in the Parliamentary Lobby. The news cartel which has shaped the reporting of politics in Britain until today was formally established in the late 1920s even though its roots go back to the 1880s (see Sparrow, 2003). The network of informal and personal contacts that had permeated the daily relationship between government, official bodies and the media in the nineteenth century was formalized. The interrelatedness of media practitioners and agents of the State in the

1930s contributed to the shaping of the output and perceptions of the media as much as the interactions between practitioners themselves.

### The synthetic whole

The search for interconnectedness threatens to downplay the contested nature of media representation and the variety of ways in which class, gender, region, political power and ‘race’ find expression in the media. Take the issue of locality and the regions. A fundamental shift took place in the British media in the 1930s. At the start of the 1920s Britain’s media were highly localized. Sound broadcasting had started as a local service based on relay stations in different parts of the country. Film-making could be found in a variety of regions outside of London and the newspaper industry was provincial in character and production. By the eve of the Second World War media production had become highly concentrated on London and the south east of England and output had become ‘national’ in outlook. Britain had one of the most centralized and metropolitan-centred media systems in the western world. Regionalized film production gave way to the establishment of studios in the London region, at Elstree, Pinewood and Denham. Under John Reith the BBC had been transformed from a regional network exchanging programmes to a national network, with regional opt outs, located in London. Finally the provincial press experienced a significant decline with the number of regional morning newspapers falling from 41 in 1920 to 23 in 1937 accompanied by a severe contraction in circulation of regional newspapers. At the same time the London press, through the extension of the rail network, extended itself into local newspaper markets throughout the country, with the exception of Scotland.

Integrated media history’s search for interconnectedness will focus study on the centralization of production and the range of media responses but in the process it risks losing sight of the story of local resistance. In the 1930s BBC nationalization was opposed by local stations, most notably Sheffield which fought a campaign bringing together unions, the Chamber of Commerce, the press and members of the public to oppose closure of its station in 1928. Cinemas across the UK had to adapt their programmes to respond to the social and cultural needs of their local consumers (see James, 2010). An increasingly commercial world emphasized that consumer tastes varied not only by region but also by gender, age and class. Locality was most acutely expressed in the form of the provincial press. Provincial morning and evening newspapers resisted the encroachment of Fleet Street in the 1930s. An example is the *Yorkshire Post*, a bastion of conservatism and the North of England. Under editor Arthur Mann it warned of becoming too close to government, discouraging contact with politicians altogether (Cockett, 1989: 62–64). The paper was more outspoken against appeasement and was the first title to break the Abdication story. This stance led to the paper merger and Mann’s departure in 1939 when diminishing financial returns undermined its independence (Cockett, 1989: 128). In the search for what has been called the ‘synthetic whole’ integrated media history might reinforce totalizing narratives. For example, telling the story of the British media in the 1930s in terms of the development of ‘national’ British

institutions can lose sight of the struggle to maintain regional and local media and identities.

### Nature of interconnectedness

The issue of which actors and institutions to focus on is accompanied by the problem of what types of interaction to investigate. Historians have traditionally considered the media as sources of information. Even historians of the cinema have tended to analyze films in terms of the extent to which they inform, or not, politics and society. The so-called ‘cultural turn’ has seen more attention on the media as sources of entertainment and in recent years the pleasure and diversion they provide have been examined in more detail. Yet the importance of the media as a leisure and recreational activity is still not fully recognized in spite of the media’s increasing dominance of people’s leisure time. In the 1930s spare time generated a significant amount of attention and unease. How ordinary people made use of their increased leisure time was the subject of numerous conferences, books, articles, columns and broadcasts. These often reflected the view expressed by *The Times* in 1929 that “spare time” was “that serious thing, a ‘problem’” (Langhamer, 2000: 19). Speculation about the consequences of excessive spare time abounded and many social ills were attributed to its growth. The extent of State intervention in the provision and organisation of leisure and recreation at local and national level to manage people’s spare time attests to the strength of the perception that leisure was a problem.

Historians have concentrated more on ‘enforced leisure’ as a result of unemployment in the 1930s than ‘spare time’. The range of meaning people made out of their spare time has largely been neglected. Historical analysis tends to focus on the politics of leisure. The growth of leisure and entertainment is usually associated with the de-politicization of the working class, a recurrent theme is the study of the popular press, cinema, broadcasting and other popular media forms. Blame is attached to the commercialization of leisure which is considered as detrimental in that it distracted people from the contemplation of contemporary issues and perpetuated public ignorance.<sup>7</sup> The media and leisure industries provided escapism from the problems of everyday life in a country beset by economic and political problems.

The effects of commercialized leisure have been subject to a re-evaluation, for example Adrian Bingham (2013) and James Nott (2002) have suggested that in spite of their use for escapism the popular media made the interwar generation “better informed” (Nott, 2002: 228). This re-evaluation seeks to refute the view that there was a de-politicization or trivialization of the media. Integrated media history shows that the balance between ‘education’ and ‘entertainment’ was a matter of struggle across the media in the 1930s. It highlights that established opinion believed that media consumption encouraged political education. More leisure time allowed people, and in particular working people, more time to read, think and learn and enhance their political awakening. For some this was a positive development as it enabled people to better fulfil their roles as citizens. However, there were many more who believed that such activity was de-stabilizing and a threat to the established political and social order. The issue of de-politicization and trivialization has

been explored primarily through the examination of media content. Historians have discussed the extent to which political coverage declined or changed in the 1930s, the misrepresentation of politics or the degree to which ‘human interest’ and fictional representation informed the public. Less attention has been paid to the study of what people learned from the media. The assumption of much media history, integrated or not, is that audiences are passive consumers with no individual agency (James, 2010: 2). The reluctance to engage with the messy world of audiences means historians have not fully engaged with the complexities of how meaning has been constructed.

### Audiences and reception

One of Nicholas’ most telling points is that the audience experience the media “as thoroughly interrelated and overlapping phenomena” (Nicholas, 2012: 389). History has not found it easy to differentiate between ‘newspaper readers’ or ‘radio listeners’ or ‘cinema goers’ or ‘newsreel watchers’ as “engagement in one medium routinely overlapped with others” (Nicholas, 2012: 390). Excavating basic quantitative material about audiences in the past, let alone their experiences, is, as we know, a challenge. Unearthing how they make sense of what they consume from different media outlets further complicates matters. In the 1930s the fact that audience surveys were in their infancy emphasizes this obstacle. Gaining insights into working people’s views and attitudes is handicapped by the lack of printed recollections. However, audience dispositions to media offerings can be deduced from other sources. Robert James (2010) in a compelling study documents the regional variations in cinema viewing and popular reading habits drawn from the booking practices of cinema hall managers and the acquisition policies of libraries and working class institutes. The letters pages of newspapers and specialist magazines such as *The Listener* and *Kineweekly* as well as the correspondence of broadcasters and wireless societies are also useful sources. Oral histories can provide impressionistic glimpses into how people experienced the media and how they integrated their knowledge and understanding from different media sources.

Understanding audiences in history is more than an appreciation of the aggregate of individual views, feelings and dreams. Consumers interpret what is represented to them but what appears in the media is influenced by producers who inscribe their audiences with particular characteristics. Producers construct their audiences out of notions of what they believe their viewers, listeners or readers should be told and their interpretation of what research tells them about people’s interests, likes and dislikes. People’s wants and desires were a feature of public discussion in the 1930s. British society to paraphrase Bernard Bergonzi (1978) had to come to terms *directly* with what has come to be described as ‘mass society’ and there was considerable debate and scrutiny about the impact and influence of the ‘masses’ on British culture and society. The creation of Mass Observation in 1937 in some ways crystallizes the obsessive concern with the views, opinions and behaviour of ordinary men and women. From art to literature, media to social research, intellectuals in Britain were ‘discovering’ ordinary people and trying to document and interpret their lives.



Historical knowledge of what ordinary people believed and desired draws heavily from contemporaneous cultural and media representation. Daniel Le Mahieu (1988) draws heavily on the views and interpretations of the intellectual and primarily metropolitan minority of the interwar years to support his argument that a common culture emerged.

Whether or not these views accurately represented people's cultural and media experience they highlight the importance attached by historical analysis to the beliefs and observations of cultural producers. Proponents of the emergence of a common culture in the 1930s often cite examples of the presence of certain individuals across the range of media. Nicholas, like Le Mahieu before her, refers to J. B Priestley's appearance in film production, radio, the press, popular literature, theatre and magazines as "the epitome of the common culture of the time" (Nicholas, 2012: 389). Priestley's struggle to make his voice heard, as well as the compromises he made, raise questions about popular culture between the wars as a contested terrain (see Baxendale, 2007). There is a need to understand the social context of cultural production in different periods of media history. In the 1930s a "complex crisis of representation" took place as the "small, compact and closely linked group" that constituted Britain's intellectual class began to lose its "coherence and authority" (Baxendale and Pawling, 1999: 28). New cultural producers were created by the advertising, media and leisure industries. Less well educated and drawn from different sections of society, most earned their living from cultural production; there was a rapid increase in those describing themselves as "authors, editors and journalists" between 1891 and 1931 (Baxendale and Pawling, 1999: 3). They were more likely as a result of the growing commercialization of cultural production to respond to what they perceived as their audiences' wants than to impose their values from above. There were also significant divisions between cultural producers concerning the response to the rise of mass society and mass culture.<sup>8</sup> Historical accounts of the 1930s tend to pit 'intellectuals' against journalists, film directors and popular novelists, and media practitioners in general, ignoring their interconnectedness in an environment in which a high level of media professionalism had not established clear boundaries.

### Emotional environment

One aspect of understanding the production process is through the personal tastes, prejudices and talent of individual media practitioners. An emphasis on political, economic and social structures has often led historians of the media to neglect the role of individuals in the creative process. David Hendy (2012) has recently drawn attention to the need to understand the role of media practitioners in history, placing emphasis on the emotional 'communities' or environment within which they operate. Historians have been reluctant to address the psychological motivations of actors in history (Rosenwein, 2002). Joanna Bourke (2003: 114) states: "although fear, hate, joy and love might be at the very heart of historical experience, they still tend to be regarded as by-products in historical scholarship." Cultural historians have embraced the social-psychological dimension of history and several historians have taken a psychoanalytical approach to excavating the past. However, emotion and conventional historical scholarship remain uneasy bedfellows.

Introducing emotion adds complications to understanding the past. It is difficult to assess and verify the psychology of individual historical actors. Yet emotion is integrated into history in a number of ways and plays a significant part in shaping the relationships that contribute to the interconnectedness of the media. In the 1930s we can talk about emotion at a number of levels. There is the public mood. Assessing the impact of the Great War on British society between the wars is fraught with problems but it is possible to argue that the rise of mass media took place in a society characterized by deep disenchantment and uncertainty. The extent to which the certainties of Edwardian Britain were swept away by the war is disputed but the efforts of families and communities across the country to come to terms with the grief produced by the huge loss of life and suffering of the war is not. The grieving found the established order wanting in a variety of ways. There was, for example, an acute decline in religious faith and church attendance accompanied by a huge growth in spiritualism (Hazelgrove, 1999). Public trust in the political establishment decreased with the failure of post-war governments to deliver on pledges to produce “a country fit for heroes to live in”. This was imbued with strong emotion highlighted by the notion of a “Lost Generation” (Winter, 2003: 99). Concerns about the influence and impact of the media have to be seen in the context of an acute sense of irrationality in public thought between the wars.

The personal battles that take up the time of individual media practitioners influence their attitude to their work. The role of individuals in making the history of the media has concentrated on the ‘good and the great’; only a few studies have attempted to explore the variety of actors who participate in the production process. There is “an enormous historical deficit to be tackled: beyond the upper ranks much cultural activity remains uncharted” (Hendy, 2012: 362). The focus of organizational studies is on the workplace, on how people participate in the world of media work and the institutional cultures they confront. Hendy focuses on how exploration of the private life histories of media practitioners contributes to our understanding of media institutions as ‘emotional communities’. Personal feelings and institutional sentiments also have to be seen as part of a broader creative culture. One is struck by the emotional commitment expressed by many media practitioners in the 1930s in relation to the audience. There was a strong motivation to document the lives of ordinary men and women across the media, to the extent that documentation could be seen as an important part of their work as information or entertainment.

### Conclusion

There are a number of methodological and conceptual issues and problems that arise from ‘doing’ integrated media history. The magnitude of the practical problems of drawing out and documenting the range and variety of interconnections between media and the media and society threatens to turn integrated media history like social history before it into descriptive history. Interconnectedness as this chapter has tried to show has many dimensions. Further connections could be identified; for example, there is an international dimension – many of the features of the British media system in the 1930s drew from experiences and interactions with other media

systems, in particular the United States. It is important to be aware of the multifaceted nature of interconnectedness and the problems it presents for the writing and researching of media history. For the interrelatedness to add up to something more than shared exposure, integrated media history has to include a variety of relationships at a number of levels, from production to reception, and draw on the accounts of the experience of a range of actors including audiences. However, in spite of the problems of such an approach to the study of history it is invaluable as it enables us to understand more fully the broad communication environment in which the media function.

### Further reading

Sian Nicholas (2012) and Henrik Bastiansen (2008) provide excellent discussions of the need for and problems of developing integrated media history. James Curran's (2002) groundbreaking article "Media and the Making of British Society c 1700–2000" advocates more media history and media histories of different kinds. John Baxendale and Chris Pawling's *Narrating the Thirties: A Decade in the Making: 1930 to the Present* (1999) examines the changing construction of the 1930s in professional and popular history, while David Hendy's "Biography and the Emotions as a Missing 'Narrative'" (2012) provides insight into the role of personality and emotion in programme making in the BBC in the 1930s. Robert James' *Popular Culture and Working Class Taste in Britain 1919–39: A Round of Cheap Diversion?* (2010) is a compelling account of regional differences in the consumption of film and popular literature in the 1930s. Daniel Le Mahieu's *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (1988) is required reading for anyone wishing to understand mass communication and popular culture in the years between the wars.

### Notes

- 1 For a discussion of the common problems and themes facing the media in 1930s Britain see Williams (2006).
- 2 This is reflected in the titles of some of the leading texts on the period: *The Dark Valley* (2000), *The Morbid Age* (2009), *The Twenty Years Crisis* (1939), *Borrowed Time* (2007), *The Long Weekend* (1940), *The Age of Illusion* (1963), *Britain on the Breadline* (1990) and *The Devil's Decade* (1973).
- 3 For example see the BBC series *People's Century* (1995) and *The Making of Modern Britain* presented by Andrew Marr (2009).
- 4 The most cited example is Stevenson and Cook's (1994) *Britain in the Depression: Society and Politics 1929–39*. For a discussion of their arguments see Howkins and Saville (1979).
- 5 For a discussion of news value of the newsreels see Young (2005).
- 6 In 1935 the national government set up the National Publicity Bureau which "carried through the first, modern large scale propaganda campaign on a national basis in the history of British politics, yet it worked so unobtrusively and anonymously that few outside the ranks of the professional politician and organisation men has any appreciation of its potency" (Casey, 1939: 624).
- 7 See, for example, essays in Day Lewis (1937).
- 8 See Williams (1994), Baxendale and Pawling (1999), Baxendale (2007).

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