Case Study 6: The Byline

Until the mid-nineteenth century journalism had been a largely anonymous affair.1 While noms de plume, aliases, initials and fictional persona were common, the case of a writer of journalism signing their own work was so rare that it was cause for comment. In his study of the eighteenth-century Tatler and Spectator founder Richard Steele, Charles Knight remarks that what gave Steele's political writing its most striking characteristic was 'his unusual willingness to sign his name to much that he wrote' (Knight 2009: 38). It was only in the 1860s that anonymity started to loosen its universal grip, at least with respect to literary and political journalism; news reports would continue to be uncredited well into the twentieth century. Anonymity came in different flavours, of course – the identities of journalists unknown to us would have been perfectly transparent to contemporaries (or a subset of them), despite the lack of a byline, as Dallas Liddle notes about Victorian journals: '[T]he cognoscenti … can tell or find out easily enough who an individual writer is' (Liddle 1997: 60). An article on anonymous journalism in the Saturday Review of 1858 makes the same point: 'Hundreds of people are well acquainted with the names of the principal contributors to the principal London papers, and could give a pretty good guess, from the nature of the subjects treated, as to the particular articles to be ascribed to any particular man' (Saturday Review, 20 November 1858: 499–500). The ubiquity of the practice led one early and exasperated historian of the press to express the hope that 'the peculiar difficulties of a subject, where a jealous reserve is necessarily maintained to support the anonymous character of the Press, which goes so far to ensure its independence, and even its influence, will be appreciated' (Andrews [1859] 1968: 352).

We can define a personal byline as the typographical device containing the name of the writer(s) of an article in a news publication. Generic bylines, of the form 'Our Own Correspondent' or 'Special Correspondent', appear from at least the late 1790s and reflect the growing importance attached to the sources and transmission of news – hence the Norwich Chronicle of 1796 bylines a parliamentary report 'By Express from our own Correspondent'; in April 1884 the bylines 'By Eastern Company's Cables' and 'By in tha nineteenth century Indo-European Telegraph' both appear on the same page of the Times. But in the nineteenth century individual news reporters or correspondents are still not named. Even William Howard Russell's subsequently celebrated reports from the Crimea were published in the Times without a personal byline. His dispatch describing the cavalry action at Balaklava, which was to inspire Tennyson's 'Charge of the Light Brigade', for instance, is simply bylined 'From Our Special Correspondent' (Times, 14 November 1854: 7). In one respect, the lack of bylines worked in Russell's favour, as the reports which inspired Florence Nightingale to offer her services have since been erroneously attributed to him, the byline to these simply reading 'From Our Own Correspondent' (Times, 12 October 1854: 7 and 13 October 1854: 8). Their author was in fact Russell's fellow Irishman Thomas Chenery (Knightley 1989: 13–14).

Equally fêted on both sides of the Atlantic was H. M. Stanley of the New York Herald, whose African encounter with David Livingstone in 1872 was an international sensation. Yet, while he was credited by name with the initial report on 2 July ('I announce the arrival this day of letters from Mr Stanley,' wrote the Herald's London correspondent), Stanley's full report was credited only to 'the New York Herald correspondent … associated with [Livingstone]' (New York Herald, 15 August 1872: 3). This reflected the general view articulated by the Times editor Thomas Barnes, who spoke for his peers when he defended 'the power of dignified anonymity' as a means of ensuring the Olympian unity of the newspaper's authorial voice.

Where anonymity featured in early nineteenth-century periodical and press production, its use could range from the playful, such as the device of the fictional letter to the editor (Goldgar 1994), sometimes protective (such as the letters of Junius, whose author's true identity is still not certain),

and sometimes as a matter of practicality (such as when news was copied from other newspapers and hence the author was unknown to the publisher).

The convention of anonymity was first challenged by the serious mid-century literary and political reviews, most vocally by the Fortnightly Review (Green 1930: 91),2 whose 1865 issue featured a strong condemnation of anonymity in journalism, penned by co-founder Anthony Trollope. Yet even this early advocate of signed journalism shied away from recommending that bylines should appear in newspapers as opposed to review journals:

The newspaper is not a lamp lighted by a single hand, but a sun placed in the heaven by an invisible creator … we may acknowledge that the present anonymous system of writing for the daily press in England is useful and salutary. (Trollope 1865: 493)

Hence bylines are to be reserved for those productions of literary merit appearing in the sober reviews (what Liddle (1997: 32) labels "the 'higher journalism' of magazines and reviews"), not ephemeral newspaper reports. This valorisation of the literary may explain the appearance of an anomalous personal sign-off byline (that is, one which appears at the end of an article) in the Times for 14 April 1884, as it was for a piece of literary criticism penned by the Edinburgh academic John Stuart Blackie.

While the issue of bylined journalism was a frequent topic of debate in the second half of the nineteenth century (often linked to discussion of the secret ballot, where anonymity was routinely associated with accountability – see, for example, King and Plunkett (eds) 2004: 574–5), it was always in the context of political journalism, commentary or reviews rather than news reporting. Maurer (1948) concisely summarises the terms of that debate but only refers in passing to news reporting. Indeed, it takes us outside our timeframe, to the interwar years of the twentieth century, before bylined news reports become common. However, a pioneering example was set by Northcliffe at the century's turn, when he faced a challenge which had been addressed by Oscar Wilde fifteen years earlier. Northcliffe launched the Daily Mirror on 2 November 1903 as a 'mirror of feminine life' aimed at cultivated women – although, as he ruefully acknowledged the following year, 'women don't want a daily newspaper of their own' (Daily Mirror, 27 February 1904: 1). Both men came up with the same solution. They wished to capitalise on the fact that much of their content was written by women, as part of efforts to market their publications to a predominantly female audience. In Wilde's case, the publication was the Woman's World in 1887; in Northcliffe's, the Daily Mirror in 1903. The solution they adopted was to byline articles so that the gender of the writer was foregrounded.

Wilde jettisoned the classical portraiture of the Lady's World cover he inherited in 1887 in favour of a list of contributors' names (placed underneath, and less prominent than, the words 'edited by Oscar Wilde', of course), which were mainly female. As Laurel Brake notes, this contrasts markedly with the articles in its former incarnation, the Lady's World, which were anonymous, so that Wilde's use of the byline functions as a means of gendering the contributors to his publication (Brake 1994: chapter 7). He wished to make it clear that his was a magazine concerned not merely with what women wore 'but with what they think, and what they feel' (Nowell-Smith 1958: 253).

Northcliffe followed suit: on page eight of the Daily Mirror issues dated 6 November and 7 November 1903, for instance, there are six features articles bylined with female names (one article being written entirely in French!), compared with only one male byline. It is true that the issue of 5 November 1903 contains four male bylines, but one of them tartly reads: 'By A Mere Man'. A comparison with Northcliffe's flagship Daily Mail indicates that the Mirror's use of bylines was a

deliberate ploy – even by 1905 the Mail only used personal bylines sparingly, such as that of the motoring expert Major G. Matson. It would not be until the 1930s that bylines started to appear routinely in the Mail. Since key early Mirror staff were seconded from the Daily Mail, including launch editor Mary Howarth, it is clear that the Mirror's practice of using bylines wasn't imported from its elder sibling but purposely introduced to drive home the message that the Mirror was a newspaper written by and for 'gentlewomen'.

Within weeks, the experiment ended disastrously, with Northcliffe later virtually boasting how he 'dropped £100,000 on the Mirror', and soon after its launch the Mirror proclaimed itself 'A Paper for Men and Women'4. Gone were the female bylines, and, tellingly, credit was liberally awarded to the artists ('Sketched by a "Mirror" artist' appears throughout), emphasising the transformation to the Daily Illustrated Mirror which took place from 25 January 1904 (evidently a rushed change, as the page tops didn't change until the following day). Clearly, the Mirror's use of bylines at its launch was not a utilitarian acknowledgement of authorship but a way of drawing attention to the gender of the writer. When illustrators rather than women writers became the Mirror's unique selling point, illustrations rather than articles were bylined. And in a final reversal of the primacy given to women journalists at the Mirror, one history of the newspaper even erases its first editor, Mary Howarth, from the picture completely – its timeline of 'Editors of the Daily Mirror' begins with Hamilton Fyfe in 1904 (Edelman 1966: 208).

The attitude of reporters themselves to bylines is mixed. Henri Blowitz, the Times's leading foreign correspondent in the 1880s, was widely regarded as a self-publicist and was admonished by Foreign Assistant Editor Mackenzie Wallace: 'Your great journalistic talent … does not easily accommodate itself to the requirements of that anonymous journalism of which The Times is the great representative' (Times 1947: 139). Similarly, the reason for Clement Scott leaving the Daily Telegraph in 1898 was that its proprietor, Edward Lawson, would not agree to Scott's signing his theatre notices – 'a practice which was contrary to the style of the paper' (Burnham 1955: 40). On the other hand, and in another century, Windsor Davies resigned from the Times's political staff over the introduction of personal bylines in 1967 with the observation: 'I knew Windsor Davies, and didn't think much of him, but to be called Parliamentary correspondent of The Times – that was really something' (Grigg 1993: 27).

By the turn of the century developments across the Atlantic were making themselves felt throughout the industry, including techniques such as the interview (Schudson 1996: chapter 3; Schudson 2008: chapter 3) and the cult of the celebrity reporter. The furiously competitive nature of the popular press, exemplified in the battles between Pulitzer and Hearst, was predicated on the transformation of 'news' (its content, style and values) from an already-given, readily-available resource to a heterogeneous and agonistic field of production; the news was being created rather than gathered5 (of course, other factors – technological and educational among them – also played a part in this transformation). The highly sensationalised Yellow Journalism associated with the two media tycoons was nothing if not proactive: campaigns, stunts, exposés, advocacy and activism were its hallmark (Spencer 2007) and the news reporter its standard-bearer. When Nelly Bly tackled sham mediums in Pulitzer's World on 25 March 1888, for instance, the article's main heading was 'Nellie Bly as a mesmerist'; this was in addition to her sign-off byline (World, 25 March 1888: 19). Her fame was such – building on her celebrated report the previous year into conditions at Bellevue insane asylum – that Bly herself had become the story. But celebrity reporters were, by definition, the exception rather than the norm,6 and it was the 1920s before bylined news reports became common (Barnhurst and Nerone 2001) – although even here there is disagreement about

methodological principles (Reich 2010). The history of the byline is a story which is still being written.

1 ‘Journalist’ is used here as shorthand for writers of periodical non-fiction, those whom Swift characterises as the ‘muses of Grub Street’ (Harris 1983: 39).

2 Macmillan’s Magazine printed contributors’ names from 1859, but this was never made a matter of explicit editorial policy nor rigorously adhered to, unlike the Fortnightly.

3 The article controversially defended Goethe against charges of amorality, so the Times may have been distancing itself from Blackie’s views by using a byline. I am indebted to Dr Stuart Wallace for this suggestion (Wallace 2016).

4 These words appeared beneath the masthead for the first time on Thursday, 28 January 1904. Northcliffe’s ‘boast’ was the front-page lead story in the issue dated 27 February 1904.

5 Shaw dismissed the notion of signed news writing precisely because it was ‘produced by “arrangers” … rather than creators who control their own language’ (DaRosa 1997: 830).