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## **NEVER FAILED?**

### **The local reporting of the Blitzes in Coventry and Liverpool in 1940 and 1941**

**Guy Hodgson and Rachel Matthews**

*The self-narrated position of the provincial press in the Second World War is that newspapers were steadfast friends to the communities they sought to serve. Their stated role was to maintain publication in the face of adversity, providing simultaneously a vital flow of information and some semblance of normality; this role was never more important than in the wake of major destruction wrought by enemy bombs. However, a qualitative analysis of coverage of the Blitzes in Coventry 1940 and the Liverpool in 1941 suggests that the construction of events in line with the 'Blitz Spirit' by local titles was at odds with the experience of people on the ground. As such it leads us to suggest that the result was to undermine long-term confidence in the ability of the press to reflect reality.*

**KEYWORDS:** newspaper history; provincial press; Second World War; Blitz.

At the end of the Second World War the role of the provincial press was trumpeted by Sir William Bailey, the president of the Newspaper Society, the organisation that represented and promoted the interests of Britain's regional and local newspapers. Writing the foreword to the congratulatory titled *They Never Failed: The Story of the Provincial Press in Wartime*, he stated that after six years of war it had 'carried home-town news to men and women in every part of the world'.<sup>1</sup> He was correct, Britain's local newspapers had provided a vital service between 1939 and 1945 carrying central and local government messages into millions of homes, providing entertainment and respite in the face of the Blitz, and keeping thousands of servicemen and women in touch with events at home. This was done despite newspaper offices being bombed, occasionally to destruction, the rationing of newsprint and ink, shortages of staff, and disruptions to transport infrastructure. Exeter's *Express and Echo* had to be printed on the covered tennis courts of the Earl of Devon after its offices were destroyed in 1942, at one time the consumption of newsprint fell as low as 20.33 per cent of pre-war supplies, and one of the larger provincial newspapers reported that it had more than 400 members of staff in the Services.<sup>2</sup> These stories were repeated in local and regional newspaper offices throughout Britain and, as Lord Burnham, who worked for the *Daily Telegraph* from 1955 to 1986, observed: 'Finance, shortages of raw material, and indeed every factor of production must have been a nightmare.'<sup>3</sup> While this article acknowledges the herculean efforts in production and determination to go to print, it challenges another of Bailey's assertions that appeared in that same introduction. Namely:

By their faithful reporting of local, national and international events [local newspapers] have inspired new confidence in their readers – those newspapers enjoy a prestige higher than at any other time in their long history.<sup>4</sup>

This article examines the gap between the experience of bombed city people and the press reports of the raids by focussing on two cities, Coventry and Liverpool, both of which suffered severe bombing during the Blitz. It proposes that the stance exhibited by the titles

examined here contributed more to the economic and cultural stability of the newspapers than to the welfare of the people they were writing about. The fidelity demonstrated by the British newspaper industry generically between 1939 and 1945 has been challenged by many historians, including Hylton, Knightley and Engel,<sup>5</sup> and there was contemporary criticism of the press in reports compiled by Mass Observation and Home Intelligence.<sup>6</sup> Carruthers, Cottle and Howard<sup>7</sup> are among those to state the default position of the press in times of war is to be patriotic and this manifested itself in a stream of propaganda, frequently surpassing what was demanded by the government and the Ministry of Information. This is well-trodden ground regarding national newspapers, but this article will concentrate on local newspapers, which have a greater contact with their audience, boast of more empathy, and, in theory, would have been expected to reflect the courage and fortitude of its readers, but also their problems and anxieties. It will show that, by adopting a narrative that relentlessly stressed the positive, confidence in the provincial press was diminished.

Lord Beaverbrook, the proprietor of the *Daily Express*, told the Royal Commission on the Press in 1948: ‘I ran the paper for propaganda, and with no other purpose,’<sup>8</sup> and Matthews has rubbished the idea that there was a golden age of local newspapers when reporters would uphold local democracy by holding local councils, courts and businesses to account. Instead she found an industry that was eternally ‘focused on profit, for which the “public interest” was little more than a stance to add legitimacy to its economic intent’.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, there were guidelines about reporting that may have been self-serving and possibly disingenuous, but they provided parameters for ethical reporting in the 1940s and it is within these guidelines that this research is drawn. At the same 1947-49 Royal Commission that provided Beaverbrook a platform, the role of a newspaper was defined:

Democratic society... needs a clear and truthful account of events, of their background and their causes; a forum for discussion and informed criticism; and a means whereby individuals and groups can express a point of view or advocate a cause. The responsibility for fulfilling these needs unavoidably rests in large measure upon the Press.<sup>10</sup>

During wartime, these claims were subsumed to a form of co-operative self-censorship, by which the provincial newspaper industry agreed to follow the portrayal of indomitable communities embodying the ‘Blitz Spirit’<sup>11</sup> used to characterise London’s response to bombing. Rather than direct censorship, Williams<sup>12</sup> has characterised this as the British way of censorship, based on agreed values shared by a like-minded body of people. Representatives of the provincial newspaper industry were key figures in the Ministry of Information, including Lord Iliffe, owner of Coventry’s *Midland Daily Telegraph*, and provincial journalists were invited to London by the Ministry to engage them in the ways the London press was framing the Blitz. This resulted in editorial self-censorship based on mutual understanding between Government and publisher, which went beyond the redaction of the official censor. It was this, this article suggests, which undermines the usually understood process of ‘agenda-setting’, by which news media influence a community’s ‘picture of itself’ by the selection and presentation of content (McCombs 1997: 442). Critically, for agenda-setting to function, readers need to be complicit in the process. While the hegemonic success of newspapers in persuading readers of this desired ‘Blitz Spirit’ perspective was revealed when Home Intelligence reported that people outside metropolitan areas had an exaggerated impression of the damage being inflicted on the capital but believed that ‘if London can take it, so can we’,<sup>13</sup> the analysis here suggests that when applied nearer to home, the consequence of the gap between the portrayed and lived experiences of populations in Coventry and Liverpool was that confidence in the press diminished.

### **‘Coventration’ and the May Blitz**

In 1940 Coventry produced cars, aeroplane engines and munitions, making it, according to Taylor, ‘a legitimate target for aerial bombing’.<sup>14</sup> The city was raided on several occasions, but the fiercest Blitz occurred on November 14-15, 1940, which caused damage so

widespread that it gave rise to new expressions, 'coventration' or 'to coventrate' – to destroy by indiscriminate bombing. The raid from around 500 bombers hit 27 important war factories and production was halted for many months, but 568 people were killed and 60,000 buildings were destroyed or badly damaged.<sup>15</sup> More than a square mile of city was in ruins, including the offices of Coventry's daily newspaper, the *Midland Daily Telegraph*. The raid had a profound psychological effect on Britain generally, but locally the impact was revealed by Levine, who collected interviews in the 1970s for the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive. Thomas Cunningham-Boothe described firemen, blinded by the ferocity of the heat, having to be led away from the fires; Dilwyn Evans spoke of those same firefighters impotently having to watch the blazing buildings as water ran out; and Joan Batt could not forgive: 'I still feel hatred for the Germans. They took everything off me.'<sup>16</sup>

Apart from London, Merseyside endured more air raids in the Second World War than any British conurbation, suffering around 80 bombing raids between August 1940 and January 1942, the peak coming from May 1, 1941, when the Luftwaffe dropped 870 tons of high-explosive bombs and more than 112,000 incendiaries in raids over seven consecutive nights.<sup>17</sup> In one week 1,741 people from Liverpool, Bootle, Birkenhead and Wallasey were killed,<sup>18</sup> which, to put this into perspective, represented nearly three per cent of every Briton killed in air raids in six years of war. The docks, through which 90 per cent of imported goods came into Britain, were the main targets, but the damage to domestic property was considerable with more than 50,000 Liverpoolians made homeless. Bootle, where the docks were principally based, suffered damage to 85 per cent of its housing leaving 25,000 without a home. The sense of desperation was reported by Levine, who quoted Marie Price:

Churchill was telling us how brave we all were and that we would never surrender. I tell you something – the people of Liverpool would have surrendered overnight if they could have. It's all right for people in authority, down in their steel-lined dugouts, but we were there and it was just too awful.<sup>19</sup>

## Method

This is a qualitative study using textual analysis to study the ‘interpretations of the meanings of texts rather than just quantifying textual features and deriving meaning from this’<sup>20</sup> as outlined by Richardson.<sup>21</sup> For example, normal news values dictate that the most important elements should be at the top of the story, so a report on heavy bombing should concentrate on the number of casualties and the extent of the damage. Any variation on this - emphasis on the work of firefighters, for example - could be due to either censorship or an attempt at propaganda to rally morale or demonise the enemy, although the subjective judgements of reporters, sub-editors and editors, or the influence of proprietors, should not be entirely discounted.

The publications were the principal newspapers in the two cities in the study, the *Midland Daily Telegraph*, renamed the *Coventry Evening Telegraph* in November 1941, and the *Liverpool Echo*. The *Telegraph* was owned by the Iliffe family, who founded what was originally a Liberal-supporting paper in 1891. Its circulation did not reach 10,000 until 1906, but by 1947 has risen to more than 80,000.<sup>22</sup> The *Liverpool Echo* was controlled by local men who descended from the Nineteenth Century original proprietors and had a daily sale, almost exclusively in Merseyside, of 236,986 in 1939.<sup>23</sup> Originally, the newspaper group, that also included the *Liverpool Daily Post*, supported the Liberal Party but after the First World War became more independent in its politics.<sup>24</sup>

The study period for the *Midland Daily Telegraph* is from November 15, 1940, the first edition in which news of the raid on Coventry could appear, until November 28, 1940, comprising 12 editions and allowing time for reflection in the aftermath of the bombing. The *Liverpool Echo*’s study period is from May 2 to May 15, 1941, also including the first instance the aerial attacks could be reported and allowing 12 editions. Both cities were attacked at night; the first bombs landed on Coventry at 19:00 on November 14 and,

Liverpool at 22:15 on May 1, so both newspapers would have had reporters in the city, who, in normal circumstances, would be expected to report fully the previous night's bombing. Damage to the newspaper offices and local infrastructure had an effect on the coverage of the raids, but the censor also had a physical presence in many newspaper offices, occupying a desk in the production areas in many cases, and most stories passed through his/her hands. The Air Ministry allowed national newspapers to name bombed cities only after it was certain the Germans knew where they had raided, normally meaning a delay of two days, and it was forbidden to identify localities and damage to buildings for 28 days. Local newspapers had slightly greater latitude in order to pass on official notices, but casualty numbers and lists were heavily censored and there was usually a four-week embargo on naming damaged landmarks. George Thomson, the chief censor, observed:

It was most important that the British Press and radio should not give the enemy information of which he was in need. The first essential was to conceal the name of the town raided until the Air Ministry were quite satisfied that the enemy knew it.<sup>25</sup>

For that reason many newspapers used vague expressions such as a 'Midlands town' until German sources announced a city had been raided.

## **The Newspapers**

### ***Midland Daily Telegraph***

The offices of the *Midland Daily Telegraph*, based in Hertford Street in the city centre, were hit in the raid of November 14-15 and the presses and library were destroyed. The editorial and commercial departments were also flooded and put out of action, so although the paper already had an emergency agreement with the *Birmingham Gazette* 18 miles away to shift production and the entire production staff were relocated, there was an inevitable impact on the coverage. Journalists left in the city to report the raid worked out of a



city centre Post Office where a room and a phone line were provided. The paper went on sale that day – albeit not in the city centre itself – not least because there were no newsagents left.

That first paper, published in the wake of an attack so devastating as to be ranked equal with the bombings on the capital, was just four pages long,<sup>26</sup> with news of the raid on Coventry limited to page 1 – indicative of the production problems which faced the title. The lead headline was actually ‘Berlin gets biggest-ever bombing’, with ‘Coventry bombed: Casualties 1,000’ and a sub-deck of ‘Waves of enemy planes in dusk to dawn raid’ below it. The devastation to Coventry was such that not naming it would have been illogical; even so, the newspaper included the censored account of events as the last paragraph on its story, under a sub-head of ‘Official Account’, acknowledging damage to ‘four Midlands towns’ in total.

An Air Ministry and Ministry of Home Security communique issued shortly before 9am to-day stated: -

Last night enemy air attacks were mainly directed against the Midlands.

**A very heavy attack was made on one Midland town.** (in bold, paper’s emphasis)  
(November 15, 1940: 1)

Over subsequent days, the extent of the damage to the city – which was left with no water, gas, electricity or drains – became apparent; as it did, so the paper’s reporting turned to the ‘boosterism’<sup>27</sup> of emphasising the resilience of the city’s population, drawing heavily on language associated with the ‘Blitz Spirit’ which had characterised coverage of the bombing of London. The edition focused on the visit by King George VI. ‘Crippled Coventry carries on’, was the headline. ‘Swift measures to restore normal life’.

Using the capital letters for emphasis in the first five paragraphs of the lead story, the paper focussed on the damage – but also in equal measures, the steps to restore order. In the text the paper reported that: ‘It was a brave people the King met. Everywhere he went the King was met with cheers and frequent shouts of such slogans as “we can take it”’

(November 16, 1940: 1). By Monday, an eight-page paper reported that the city was showing

the first signs of 'resuscitation'; some phone and electricity supplies were being restored, the police were functioning, the mayor was out and about. While there had been little advertising in the four-page editions, radio listings were included in their usual place on page two of the paper of November 18. The editorial was particularly effusive.

Coventry is recovering slowly but magnificently from the stunning shock of Thursday night's bombing holocaust. The manner of that recovery pays its tribute to the superb coolness and resource of a population who had at no times shown the slightest tendency to panic. (November 18, 1940: 4)

Yet, as the editions progressed, the underlying horror of the reality in Coventry began to appear in the *Telegraph*, not via direct discussion of the conditions, but via the juxtaposition of various stories and adverts. Not least were the reports of the multiple mass funerals which took place to bury up to 250 victims of the attack at a time. In addition, was the mounting evidence of the desperation which faced those still in the city. The paper warned of typhoid because of damaged sewers – and followed up with details of a mass vaccination programme. On page five of the paper of Tuesday November 19 a picture story proclaiming 'Coventry's Carry On Spirit', sat next to a court report of a labourer sentenced to 28 days hard labour for looting. The defence stated that the man had been homeless since the bombing, had not slept for two days because he had nowhere to go and had taken some beer in the hope that it would make him sleep. Other stories told us that compulsory billeting was to be introduced so that those made homeless could return from out-of-town rest centres; a municipal cafeteria was set up to feed 1,000 people an hour. The paper itself set up a 'lost and found' service to reunite dislocated families – and responded to a call from members of the armed forces for information about their loved ones in the city which was, to all intents and purposes, cut off from the outside world. The edition of Wednesday, November 20, included a detailed directory of aid with the largest dedicated to meeting the basic needs of providing food and shelter – nearly a week after the attack. And help was clearly slow in

coming with the paper calling on the city to administer ‘first aid until the authorities ... can bring the full force of assistance to you.’ (November 19, 1940: 1).

As the editions increased in pagination, so the proportion of both display and classified advertising increased, in line with the exhortation of war-time newspapers to provide as near-normal a service as possible. Many of these focussed on the impact of the bombing, either via providing information to staff and customers of local businesses about temporary premises or opening hours, or through products which directly addressed the stricken population including Tizer – with its ‘health-giving refreshment’, Ovaltine as a cure for ‘broken sleep’ and Owbridge’s Lung Tonic for Coughs and colds which suggested the population ‘risk more than Bombs during an air raid’.

Increasingly the paper also carried adverts for air raid shelters; this followed muted coverage of criticism for the official provision of shelters in Coventry. The *Telegraph* of Saturday, November 23, had carried a one-paragraph report of a meeting of the Coventry Trades Council which called for the provision of deep bomb-proof shelters, a critique which was continued in the national title of the Communist Party, the *Daily Worker*. The day before, a company in nearby Leicester had advertised ‘prompt-delivery’ of ‘Concrete Domestic Air-raid Shelters’ (5) with other companies following suit with display advertisements.

Perhaps most telling was the edition of Monday, November 25, ‘Recovering the Victims of Coventry Blitz – Denial of a Rumour’ addressing gruesome stories circulating in the city.

The *Midland Daily Telegraph* is able officially to deny rumours that large numbers of people still remain trapped beneath central buildings that collapsed as a result of the big air raid.

In the last few days it has been widely stated that not only are many bodies still buried beneath piles of debris and that in some cases central shelters are being sealed up, but that a number of people trapped on the night of November 14 are still alive, and being fed regularly by tubes.

Such statements are authoritatively declared to be incorrect. (November 25, 19140: 5).

Despite this, the dominant stance of the newspaper did not waiver, particularly in the title's editorials and daily comment column, *A Warwickshire Man's Diary*, which described how resilient citizens were quick to offer a cup of tea to visitors, or how helpless old ladies were turned from desperate to 'jaunty' with a warm drink and something to eat (November 23, 1940: 4).

### ***Liverpool Echo***

After three days of the May Blitz, the offices that the *Liverpool Echo* shared with the *Liverpool Daily Post* were an isolated island in a city of debris. Five hundred roads were closed to traffic, railways and tram lines were destroyed, 700 water mains and 80 sewers were damaged and telephone services cut off. Incendiary bombs had come through the roof of the *Echo's* Victoria Street premises, the outside walls had been drenched by water to prevent the building setting alight and the electricity, gas and telegraph had been cut off.<sup>28</sup> All communication with London had been severed and the *Echo* and *Post* were able to gain access to national and international news only thanks to a fleet of cars carrying copy from the *Manchester Guardian* and *Manchester Evening News*.

The *Echo* comprised four to six pages in the study period, underlining the difficulties caused by the rationing of newsprint, and the editorial challenge of providing adequate coverage in such a limited space. The first night of the May Blitz was reported on May 2, and the influence of the censorship is apparent. In normal circumstances the story of an air raid on the city would have been on the front page with the number of fatalities in the introduction. Instead it appeared on page five and there were no details of where the bombs landed, nor the number of casualties. There was evidence of propaganda, too. The main headline made no reference to the raid, but concentrated on a rare positive, a local hero, reading: 'Hero in night fighter'. The sub-heads below it played down the effects of the bombing: 'Short, sharp raid';

‘Few Merseyside casualties’, ‘A bomber down’; and ‘Fire-fighters again do good work’. The copy used the derogative ‘raiders scuttled for home’, evoking an image of a beaten and scared opponent, when an objective report, if it had referenced an inconsequential part of the narrative at all, could have used ‘turned’ or ‘headed’.

The following day's coverage of the raids led the front page but followed the template of Van Dijk's ideological square by characterising positive self-representation and negative representation of the enemy:

We may expect that Our good actions and Their bad ones will in general tend to be described at a higher, more specific level, with many (detailed) propositions. The opposite will be true for Our bad actions and Their good ones, which, if described at all, will both be described in rather general, abstract and hence 'distanced' terms, without giving much detail.<sup>29</sup>

For example, the Air Ministry was reported as anticipating a large number of casualties in Liverpool, but the *Echo* countered that gloomy prognosis by stating that the newspaper ‘understands that, happily, they are not so heavy as was feared’ (May 3, 1941, 4). The cross heads lower down the report emphasised German crimes - ‘Hit a cemetery’ and ‘Four hospitals’. The former was mock outrage contrived by the reporter and reinforced by the sub-editor, albeit there would have been distress for the families of the dead. No bomber several thousand feet in the air in the dark would have aimed at such a militarily meaningless target as a cemetery, but, by contrast, an adjoining report about a raid by the RAF stated: ‘fires were seen in the industrial areas and docks’.

The night of Saturday/Sunday (May 3-4) marked the heaviest bombing of the May Blitz and the *Echo* was fortunate that it did not have an edition on the Sunday because work to restore power and repair damage on May 4 was not completed until 3pm, too late to bring out an evening newspaper other than a city centre edition in a city where very little of the centre remained.<sup>30</sup> The edition of Monday May 5 marked a moment when the censorship relaxed sufficiently for a comment piece on page two to acknowledge some of the damage to

Liverpool. A propaganda-influenced theme of civilian casualties and hitting back ensured a positive frame, with a headline that read 'Merseyside carries on' and with an emphasis on reports that 16 bombers had been shot down, but it read: "Some of our best-known landmarks have been damaged; hospitals, churches and many houses have been hit and the loss of life will be heavy....that we can bring down 16 enemy planes in a night should indicate that our defenders can give a bit back too.' This positive message was reinforced on page four, a main news page that included seven photographs on the Blitz. A message from the Lord Mayor, Sir Sydney Jones, asserted: 'No efforts are being spared to see that all the services which so vitally affect the city and the life of the people at the present time are being maintained to the fullest possible extent' (4). This, despite an independent report that demonstrated Liverpoolians had lost faith in the local authority.<sup>31</sup>

Even though the *Echo* was a Liverpool paper and the city would continue to be raided for another three nights, the number and detail of reports on the May Blitz began to dwindle, possibly because the censors' insistence on lack of detail meant that reports full of un-named civilian targets became repetitive. A report on May 6 introduced a literary flourish by describing a blazing Liverpool church (St Luke's, the damaged remains of which stand today as a memorial to the dead) where 'the ever-changing patterns of the flames as seen in the many windows [appeared] like living stained glass'. The reference was towards the end of a long report on page six, however, that was led by an attack on the Rhine headed 'RAF Attack Mannheim'. Instead of reporting the bombing raids on Liverpool there was a search for heroes: an ARP [Air Raid Precaution] telephonist who matched 'the courage of her soldier fiancé, who took part in the epic of Dunkirk' on May 7; and three women who had put out fires in 'one of the city's fashionable shopping streets' two days later. An indication of what could have been reported and was not appeared in a large display advertisement on page three of the May 10 edition that urged Liverpoolians affected by the bombing to boil water for at

least two minutes with the accompanying information: 'Do not be alarmed if the water to your premises has the taste of chlorine. This is an indication that the purity of the supply has been safeguarded'. Only on May 15 (page four) was the newspaper able to identify which famous buildings had been damaged, including Liverpool Central Library, Liverpool Museum and the Rotunda Theatre. Earlier mention had been prohibited and its inclusion, ahead of the normal 28-day embargo, would have been allowed only because the information had become common knowledge.

### **'Hysteria, terror, neurosis'**

While newspapers stressed the positive, there was another set of contemporary reports in Coventry and Liverpool, conducted by Home Intelligence who monitored morale for the government, which gave alternative narratives. Three inspectors visited Coventry on November 15, 1940 and discovered 'unprecedented dislocation and depression'. Their report, written on November 18, added:

There were more open signs of hysteria, terror, neurosis, observed in one evening than during the whole of the past two months together in all areas. Women were seen to cry, to scream, to tremble all over, to faint in the street, to attack a fireman, and so on. The overwhelmingly dominant feeling on Friday was the feeling of utter helplessness.<sup>32</sup>

This contrasted with the reports in the *Midland Daily Telegraph* and others; the front page of the *Daily Express*, for example, reported on November 16 that the city was stricken 'but keeps its courage and sanity', states of mind that eluded the Home Intelligence reporters who witnessed people desperate to leave the city. Their report read:

There were several signs of suppressed panic as darkness approached. In two cases people were seen to be fighting to get on to cars, which they thought would take them out into the country, though in fact, the drivers insisted, the cars were just going up the road to the garage. If there had been an attack on Friday night, the effects in terms of human behavior would have been much more striking and terrible.<sup>33</sup>

The report concluded with a plea for restraint from newspapers, stressing the 'undesirability of the extremely exaggerated accounts of "marvellous courage" etc. put out in the press'.<sup>34</sup>

These, they wrote were ‘out of key with real feeling in Coventry’, but their request was largely ignored because, as Knightley wrote, the reaction of the local population did not conform to the myth of stoicism under fire.<sup>35</sup> In the sample studied, the *Midland Daily Telegraph* carried just one reference to criticism of the ‘silly dope’ stories in the national press which had created a false impression of the city’s response to the Blitz via a substantial report of a meeting of the Coventry Trades Council (November 25, 1940: 6), which according to reports in the *Daily Worker* of November 20, was part of a workers’ movement to step in to address the chaos in the city.

There was also a report by Home Intelligence on Liverpool in the aftermath of the May Blitz, albeit a limited one. An inspector, who had lived in the city as a child, wrote a report on May 22, 1941, after a personal three-day visit that he conceded was not the ‘penetration study’ of normal reports.<sup>36</sup> He interviewed a wide range of people including officials, the clergy, a doctor, policemen, many ‘ordinary people’ and, pertinently for this article, an editor of a Liverpool newspaper<sup>37</sup>. The report listed two outstanding attitudes: almost universal criticism and dis-satisfaction with the city’s post-Blitz administration; and an atmosphere of ineptitude and a ‘relative lack of energy’. The author noted that dis-satisfaction was prevalent in most bombed cities but ‘never from so many sources and such vehemence as in Liverpool’. He added:

The general feeling... [is] that there was no power and drive left in Liverpool to counter-attack the Luftwaffe. It was being left to the citizens of Liverpool to pick themselves up. There was practically nothing... to put a people back on its feet after perhaps the worst continuous battering any people have yet had in this country in this war.<sup>38</sup>

The inspector made a series of observations that contradicted the press reports of civilian fortitude, including, for the first time in any town or city, hearing a conversation where ‘one side argued in favour of our surrender’. He also noted that morale among young people was a particular concern and a ‘complete divorce’ between key local politicians and the ‘worried or bewildered 99 per cent’. The author wrote that there were ‘unprintably violent comments on



local leadership... from sources which on previous visits to Liverpool had been as satisfied and conservative as anyone', with criticisms focussing on the lack of information emanating from local authorities, inadequate planning with regard to rest centres and the feeding arrangements that 'completely collapsed'. Yet he noted that no-one had been dismissed or penalised for these confusions. 'On the contrary,' he wrote, 'there is said to be talk of honours'.

This lack of information and the over-optimistic reporting of the press, compounded by the disruption to postal, telephone and telegram services, led to a spread of rumours in Liverpool and surrounding areas. The Home Intelligence inspector noted two: that martial law had been imposed in the city; and that a peace march had been held. He dismissed both as untrue, but underlined the dangers to morale caused by gossip when he recorded a conversation in Preston with a member of the WAAF [Women's Auxiliary Air Force] who quoted a colleague called Jean: 'Have you heard about Liverpool?... They say people want to give in.' A second quotation was indicative of cracks in the veneer of togetherness:

I don't believe it's the people. I think it's those wretched Irish trying to create panic. It's very easy to. They're going around shouting 'Stop the War' and 'We've had enough!' English people wouldn't do that... I was told they have got martial law there, and that if anyone is found saying they want the war stopped, they're shot on the spot.<sup>39</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Even in the early weeks of the Second World War, Mass Observation, a social research programme that monitored British public opinion from 1937 to the mid 1960s, reported that 69 per cent of people were sceptical about what they read in newspapers, noting 'the general curve of distrust of the news has been rising during the last year'.<sup>40</sup> The reporting of the bombing of Coventry and Liverpool reinforced this lack of faith, particularly when civilians could compare their own experiences with what was appearing in newspapers and

on the radio. Rita Maloney, a 20-year-old clerical worker and Mass Observation diarist, commented after Manchester Blitz of December 1940:

When we heard the BBC's summing up of our Blitz, making it sound rather like a village which had had a stick of bombs dropped on it, along with many others, we wondered how true the reports on Coventry and Liverpool were, and all the other towns. We are carrying on and 'taking it' because we've got to, but we aren't very happy about it.<sup>41</sup>

In the aftermath of the Coventry Blitz another Mass Observation diarist, a Preston salesman, Christopher Tomlin, said people did not believe the casualty figures they were reading.

'Some of my customers say: 'If they mention 1,000 killed you can take it for granted there are lots more'.<sup>42</sup> The near vacuum of news also led to wild rumours after Liverpool's May Blitz and the above Home Intelligence officer reported several other conversations: a lorry driver was quoted: 'There's 50,917 dead, and God-knows-how-many wounded, just walking the streets, with their bandages on.'; a woman with relatives in Liverpool said 'there's a lot of fifth column business, and they've been told to shoot on sight'; and a 'working man' from Leek, Staffordshire, reported 'train loads of corpses have been sent up from Merseyside for mass cremation'.<sup>43</sup>

All of which was an indictment of the reports people were reading in the press and contrary to Bailey and the Newspaper Society's assertions about the local newspaper industry at the end of the war. He would have been aware that other reports were published during the war that questioned the press's reporting of the Blitz, most notably from Tom Harrison, a founder of Mass Observation, who compiled a report for Home Intelligence in 1941. In it he criticised the 'intense ballyhoo' about wonderful morale after each town has been bombed, a formula that, he said, 'infuriated each place in turn'.<sup>44</sup> He also noted the 'superficial observations' of journalists, who reported on bombed towns and cities which 'produced a picture of complete courage, determination, carry-onism [sic]; a vast press propaganda of 'everything is OK with the civilians'.' Harrison argued that this reporting had glossed over tensions and weaknesses that, consequently, had not received the attention they needed and

that it made it 'practically disloyal to suggest that morale is not perfect'. He added that the 'rosy atmosphere of 100 per cent morale' had been so pronounced that Home Intelligence inspectors had begun to doubt their findings about weak morale in Manchester, Portsmouth and Bristol. 'Confidence in news and official statements, which are vital in keeping morale steady and people wide awake, has strikingly declined,' he added,<sup>45</sup> This report was published in February 1941 and the evidence of the *Liverpool Echo's* coverage of the May Blitz three months later indicates it did not temper the propaganda. A study of the *Guardian* archive showed that the editor, W. P. Crozier, frequently bemoaned the restrictions placed by the censor but did not address the 'carry-on' reports in his own newspaper.<sup>46</sup> Cyril Dunn, a *Yorkshire Post* journalist, summed up the inclination to back rather than objectively chronicle the war when he visited Manchester and met several distressed people including a publican who said: 'All I want to do is to get out of here... I've had enough.' Dunn commented: 'I wrote the usual story about the cheerful courage and determined endurance of the Manchester folk.'<sup>47</sup>

This article has shown that, for all the merits of local and provincial newspapers between 1939 and 1945, the inclination of the press to be patriotic in times of conflict, to support rather than report, was counter-productive. Newspapers, as the principal sources of news at the start of the war, were restricted by the censors, but also struck a tone that shaped content so that they became both an outlet and co-creators of government propaganda. Rather than inspiring, as Bailey asserted, new confidence in readers jaundiced by the reporting from the Western Front between 1914 and 1918, the opposite happened. Newspapers did not enjoy a prestige higher than at any other time by 1945, but, as Harold Evans, a schoolboy in Manchester during the Second World War and a future editor of *The Times* and *Sunday Times*, wrote, the trust in what appeared in print had further declined. He stated that people no longer quoted newspapers to establish fact - 'Oh, but it was in the papers,' - prompting

him to ask: ‘What if you could not trust the newspapers to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth? Which institution was more trustworthy, the state or the press?’<sup>48</sup>

Circulations rose between 1939 and 1945<sup>49</sup> – the daily figure for the national press from 9.9 million in 1937 to 15.4 million 10 years later – but so did the disillusionment with newspapers. Despite the British public being brought to the front line by the Blitz, surveys indicated that the lack of interest in the news rose from nine per cent in spring 1940 to more than a third of the population by the beginning of 1941,<sup>50</sup> and another survey found that 60 per cent of interviewees read newspapers for items other than war news.<sup>51</sup> The same report asserted that readers felt there was too much propaganda, which was making them feel apathetic about the war. Given that proximity is a key news value and the investment the British public made in the Second World War, it was a damning verdict.

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- <sup>1</sup> Fletcher. *They Never Failed*, 5
- <sup>2</sup> Fletcher. *They Never Failed*.
- <sup>3</sup> Lord Burnham. *Peterborough Court*, 181.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 5.
- <sup>5</sup> Hylton. *Their Darkest Hour*; Knightley. *First Casualty*; Engel. *Tickle the Public*
- <sup>6</sup> Mass Observation. SxMOA1/1/5/5/32, FR 126, *Report on the Press*; SxMOA1/1/6/2/3, FR 568, *Morale in 1941*.
- <sup>7</sup> Carruthers. *Media at War*; Cottle. *Mediatized Conflict*; Howard. *War and Nations*.
- <sup>8</sup> HMSO Royal Commission (Documentary Evidence: Question Session on 18 March 1948), pp. 154-5.
- <sup>9</sup> Matthews, Rachel. *History of the Provincial Press*, x.
- <sup>10</sup> HMSO. *Royal Commission*, 101
- <sup>11</sup> Calder, 1991.
- <sup>12</sup> Williams 2010
- <sup>13</sup> Mass Observation. Box 1, *Propaganda*.
- <sup>14</sup> Taylor, *Dresden* 117.
- <sup>15</sup> Gilbert. *Second World War*, 142. Contemporary reports put the death toll at 1,000.
- <sup>16</sup> Levine. *Forgotten Voices*, 390, 414.
- <sup>17</sup> Merseyside Maritime Museum *May Blitz*.  
<http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime/exhibitions/blitz/blitz.aspx>
- <sup>18</sup> Gardiner. *Blitz*.
- <sup>19</sup> Levine. *Forgotten Voices*, 412.
- <sup>20</sup> Richardson, *Analysing Newspapers*, 15.
- <sup>21</sup> Richardson, *Analysing Newspapers*.
- <sup>22</sup> Viscount Camrose, *British Newspapers*, 105.
- <sup>23</sup> Adam Matthew Publications. *Popular Newspapers*.  
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- <sup>24</sup> HMSO. *Royal Commission*.
- <sup>25</sup> Thomson. *Blue Pencil Admiral*, 77-78.
- <sup>26</sup> The wartime pagination was usually 12 pages. For the duration of the sample, the pagination was held at four for November 15 and 16. It was then set at eight pages until it returned to 12 on November 27.
- <sup>27</sup> McCombs (1997) defines boosterism as a particular form of agenda setting which involves news as ‘cheerleading’ and is usually applied to items which concern economic improvement. In this instance, it refers to the editorial stance of boosting morale.
- <sup>28</sup> Fletcher. *They Never Failed*.
- <sup>29</sup> T. A. Van Dijk, ‘Opinions and Ideologies in the Press’, 35.
- <sup>30</sup> Fletcher. *They Never Failed*.
- <sup>31</sup> Mass Observation, SxMOA1/1/6/5/26, FR 706, *Liverpool*.
- <sup>32</sup> Mass Observation, SxMOA1/1/5/11/17, FR 495, *Coventry*.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> Knightley, *First Casualty*, 262.
- <sup>36</sup> Mass Observation, SxMOA1/1/6/5/26, FR 706, *Liverpool*.
- <sup>37</sup> He did not specify which – there were three at the time: the *Liverpool Echo*, *Liverpool Daily Post* and *Liverpool Evening Express* – and the author, too, was not identified, but he had been to ‘nearly every important Blitz town and studied it’.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>40</sup> Mass Observation, SxMOA1/1/5/5/32, FR 126, *Report on the Press*.
- <sup>41</sup> Mass Observation, SxMOA1/1/6/1/7, FR 538, *Liverpool and Manchester*
- <sup>42</sup> Garfield, *We are at War*, 413.

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<sup>43</sup> Mass Observation, SxMOA1/1/6/5/26, FR 706, *Liverpool*.

<sup>44</sup> Mass Observation, SxMOA1/1/6/2/3, FR 568, *Morale in 1941*. Mass Observation, FR 568.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>46</sup> Hodgson, Guy. *War Torn*.

<sup>47</sup> Dunn. 'Bombing is a Messy Business', Notebook XIV, November 1940 to April 1941, 26 December 1940, cited in Gardiner, *The Blitz*, p. 215.

<sup>48</sup> Evans, *My Paper Chase*, 7

<sup>49</sup> Butler, David and Sloman, Anne, eds., *British Political Facts*

<sup>50</sup> Mass Observation, SxMOA1/1/6/2/3, FR 568, *Morale in 1941*.

<sup>51</sup> Mass Observation, SxMOA1/1/5/5/32, FR 126, *Report on the Press*.

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