

CHAPTER SEVEN

“IT MAKES ME SPIT”: THE PUBLIC AND NEWSPAPER REACTION TO THE UK GOVERNMENT’S THREAT TO SUPPRESS THE *DAILY MIRROR* IN 1942

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The threat to suppress the *Daily Mirror* in 1942 was the most serious fracture in the relationship between the British government and UK newspapers in the Second World War. Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister, wanted to close the *Mirror* to halt a flow of criticism that he considered was detrimental to the war effort, a course of action that would have also sent a warning to the press generally. It was a full-scale confrontation between Downing Street and Fleet Street that, had it been carried through to suppression, would have had implications for press freedom that would have extended far beyond the basic fact that nearly two million people would have been denied the opportunity to purchase the publication of their choice. Ultimately the *Mirror* received a very public admonishment, delivered by the Home Secretary Herbert Morrison in a statement to Parliament, rather than closure, but even though the government reined back, Margach described it as a "miracle" that journalism survived the confrontation and the other restrictions imposed on British newspapers between 1939 and 1945.¹

This chapter will examine the reaction to the government’s stance on the *Mirror*, initially by rival newspapers, who campaigned vigorously on its behalf on the grounds of freedom of speech, but principally by the public. Mass Observation, who, in co-ordination with Home Intelligence, monitored morale on behalf of the government in the Second World War,

¹ James Margach, *The Abuse of Power: the War Between Downing Street and the Media* (London: Allen, 1978), 84.

compiled two reports in April 1942 that comprised analysis of the views of 500 Britons. Two Mass Observation reports in four weeks can be seen as an indicator of keen interest in government circles, but those reports were complemented by four memos written in March and April by unnamed officials that also commented on the public's reaction to the government's warning to the newspaper. By way of comparison, the May Blitz of 1941, a seven-night bombing campaign that killed nearly 1,800 people in Liverpool and other areas of Merseyside, merited a report, and that by a Home Intelligence inspector who happened to be on a "personal visit", and a more structured report by Home Intelligence on 10 June.²

The 1942 Home Intelligence reports examine the reception by the public to both the government's warning to the *Daily Mirror* and to trust in British newspapers generally. This chapter will show that the findings undermine the message of togetherness being transmitted by Churchill and the Ministry of Information and throw doubts on the effectiveness of newspapers' ability to influence their readers and manufacture consent.

A Sensible but Irreverent Newspaper

The *Daily Mirror's* placing as a significant irritant to the government in 1942 was the more remarkable for its character and political significance less than a decade earlier. Originally launched in 1903 by Lord Northcliffe as a newspaper written by women for women, the newspaper went through various revamps but by the early 1930s – and the historiography achieves rare unanimity in this – it was resolutely dull. Cudlipp described it as "sunk into a coma", Hagerty as a "prudish schoolmarm", and Conboy as a newspaper that was aimed at a metropolitan middle class "who might have been better served by the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail*".³ With the daily sale drifting towards 700,000 the *Mirror* was in danger of extinction, but it was transformed in 1934 by the editorial director Harry

² Mass Observation Archive, FR 706 *Liverpool*, May 22, 1941; Home Intelligence Special Report on conditions in Merseyside, June 10, 1941, accessed December 5, 2016,

<http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/SearchDetails/FileReport-706?thumbnailIndex=1#Snippets>; UKData Service, accessed October 7, 2016, <http://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/QualiBank/Document/?id=q-986cd8b7-2bd3-4fdc-b68b-92dbf59a0927&q=Liverpool>

³ Hugh Cudlipp, *Publish and be Damned*, 2nd edn, (Brighton, Revel Barker, 2009), 63; Bill Hagerty, *Read All About It: 100 Years of the "Daily Mirror"* London, : First Stone, 2003), 39; Martin Conboy, *Journalism in Britain: a Historical Introduction* (London: Sage, 2011), 111.

Bartholomew, who eradicated the stuffy image with heavy, black headlines and greater use of pictures and strip cartoons. The new look paved the way for the sensible but irreverent newspaper aimed principally at the working classes that Hagerty deemed a "jolly jack-the-lad" character.⁴ Engel described the *Mirror* as "the intelligent chap leaning on the counter of the bar: not lah-di-dah or anything – he liked a laugh, and he definitely had an eye for the girls – but talking a lot of common sense".⁵ As this implied, there was substance behind the typographical dressing and the *Mirror's* circulation rose from the dwindling figure of 1934 to 1.367 million in 1939 and 4.193 million in 1951 by, according to Taylor, voicing "the outlook of the masses".⁶

Temple stated that the *Mirror* "came of age" in the Second World War, initiating the gradual move towards "more pictorial" newspapers and pitching itself, with some justification, as the "favourite paper of Britain's armed forces".⁷ Curran and Seaton partly attributed this "radicalising rapport" to the wartime rationing of newsprint that had agencies "begging" for advertising space and so eliminated the financial pressure to provide a consensual approach preferred by advertisers.⁸ The reduced print runs and pegged circulations also eliminated the need to chase audiences. Smith conducted textual analysis and concluded the *Mirror* adopted a rhetoric that corresponded with a "new mood of radical populism", although this did not translate into outright opposition to the government.⁹ Indeed, Curran and Seaton wrote that *Mirror* journalists felt they were doing the opposite, in that they were helping the war effort because Britain "could not afford incompetence that arose from snobbery and privilege", while Thomas suggested it was debatable whether the 1940s *Mirror* differed

⁴ Hagerty, *Read All About It*, 39.

⁵ Matthew Engel, *Tickle The Public. One Hundred Years of the Popular Press* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1996), 161.

⁶ David Butler and Anne Sloman, Anne, eds., *British Political Facts 1900-1975*, 5th edn, (London: Macmillan, 1975), 388; A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 172.

⁷ Mick Temple, *The British Press* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2008), 49; Roy Greenslade, *Press Gang: How Newspapers Make Profits from Propaganda* (London: Pan, 2004), p. 11.

⁸ J. Curran and J. Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility: Press, Broadcasting and the Internet in Britain*, 6th edn (London: Routledge, 2010), 63.

⁹ Anthony C. H. Smith, *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change 1935-1965* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975) 62, 142.

greatly from the entertainment-centred version of the current day.¹⁰ Engel, too, detected no malice in the *Mirror*'s coverage. He described the paper's war as a "specialised version that turned into Britain's guiding folk myth: that of the brave, good-humoured people buckling down to fight Hitler", which conformed almost perfectly to the image prescribed by government propaganda.¹¹

Yet the perception in Downing Street was very different. Soon after Churchill became Prime Minister in May 1940 the *Mirror* Group director Cecil King was called to Downing Street to be warned for "political bickering", and in October 1940 a meeting of the War Cabinet discussed reports in the *Mirror* that Churchill described as "dangerous and sinister". He added that the *Mirror*'s motive was "to bring about a situation in which the country would be ready for a surrender".¹² This was a serious allegation, but by January 1941 the Prime Minister's condemnations became stronger:

There is a spirit of hatred and malice against the government which, after all is not a party government but a national government almost unanimously chosen, which surpasses anything I have ever seen in English journalism. One might have thought that in these hard times some hatred might be kept for the enemy.¹³

Price attributed this hostility to the newspaper's outspokenness, Conboy to the "crusade against 'Army foolery'" and Williams to the *Mirror*'s calls for post-war reconstruction.¹⁴ He wrote: "The *Mirror* departed from the respectful tones of the rest of the press to firmly commit itself to the side of 'us', the people, against 'them', the appeasers and hangers on in the government who... had got Britain into the war." The mood was

¹⁰ Curran and Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*, 58; James Thomas, "'A Cloak of Apathy': Political Disengagement, Popular Politics and the Daily Mirror 1940-1945", *Journalism Studies*, 5(4), (2010): 469-482.

¹¹ Engel, *Tickle The Public*, 167.

¹² Lance Price, *Where Power Lies: Prime Ministers v the Media* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 119; The National Archives, *UK War Cabinet minutes*, CAB/65/9/29, October 7, 1940, accessed April 4, 2017, <http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/large/cab-65-9.pdf>

¹³ Maurice Edelman, *The Mirror: A Political History* (London: Hamilton, 1966), 105.

¹⁴ Price, *Where Power Lies*, 118; Martin Conboy, *The Language of Newspapers* (London: Continuum, 2010), 125; Kevin Williams, *Get Me a Murder a Day: A History of Mass Communication in Great Britain* (London: Hodder Arnold, 1998) 143.

combustible and the spark to set off a debate about the *Mirror's* future was provided by a cartoon by Philip Zec in March 1942. Zec, a Jew who according to Edelman was on a Nazi black list, reacted to a rise in the cost of petrol by drawing a half-drowned merchant seaman clinging to some wreckage in a wild sea. His original caption read: "Petrol is dearer now", but William Connor, who wrote the Cassandra column, suggested the stronger: "The price of petrol has increased by one penny' – official".¹⁵ The edition went to press "with dynamite strapped to its back".¹⁶

Methodology

The principal point of inquiry is the files of Mass Observation and Home Intelligence based at the University of Sussex, which have been subject to academic debate. Even Calder and Sheridan, whose book *Speak for Yourself* was an anthology of the Mass Observation diaries, conceded that the sampling was unrepresentative in that the writers were predominantly clerks, students, teachers or middle-class housewives and the geographical spread was "skewed" towards South-East of England. But they concluded: "Does this mean that the panel was sociologically worthless? Certainly not. It gave... access to the private opinions of hundreds of people"¹⁷.

This research concentrated on the months of March and April 1942 when the issue of the *Daily Mirror* was towards the forefront of government minds and Mass Observation compiled a report based on 300 interviews (*Further Report on "Daily Mirror"*) published on April 2 and another (*Daily Mirror Warning and News Belief*) that monitored the views of 200 interviewees from 30 areas of Britain and was published on April 30.¹⁸ The samples are not large, but provide an indicator of the prevailing public mood. Two Mass Observation memos in March 1942 (*Warning the Daily Mirror* and *Broadcast for the Far East*) were also studied along

¹⁵ "'The price of petrol has increased by one penny' - official", *Daily Mirror*, March 6, 1942, 3.

¹⁶ Hagerty, *Read All About It*, 52.

¹⁷ Angus Calder and Dorothy Sheridan, eds., *Speak for Yourself: A Mass-Observation Anthology 1937-1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 74.

¹⁸ Mass Observation Archive, FR 1197, *Further Report on "Daily Mirror"*, 2 April 1942, accessed March 31, 2017, <http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/SearchDetails/FileReport-1197?thumbnailIndex=1#Snippets>; Mass Observation Archive, FR 1231, *Daily Mirror Warning and News Belief*, April 30, 1942, accessed January 21, 2017, <http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/SearchDetails/FileReport-1231?thumbnailIndex=1#Snippets>

with two Home Intelligence weekly reports that were written on March 25 and April 1.¹⁹ This comprised all the relevant documentation on the issue in the Mass Observation files.

The Times, the *Daily Mail*, the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Daily Mirror* were analysed for this article, representing a cross-section of the British press and reflecting different proprietors, political allegiances and target audiences. These newspapers are digitally archived and were searched using the filters “Mirror”, “Morrison” or “Zec” between the dates of March 7, 1942, the first day in which reaction to the cartoon could have appeared, to April 30, 1942, by which time the threat of suppression had receded and other reports, such as the award of the George Cross to the island of Malta, had affected the news agenda. Every article was studied – some 60 extracts – but particular attention was paid to leading articles, which reflected the opinion of the newspaper, and readers’ letters, that articulated the views of the public and, by the very fact of publication, had gone through gate-keeping with the newspaper’s editorial stance in mind.

‘A reckless indifference to the national interest’

Given the tensions in Downing Street, the timing of Zec’s cartoon (Friday, March 6, 1942) could not have been much more unfortunate. On February 16 the *Mirror* had reacted to the fall of Singapore to the Japanese with a stinging editorial:

The assumption that whatever blunders are committed and whatever faults are plainly visible in organisation, we must still go on applauding men who muddle our lives away, is a travesty of history and a rhetorical defiance of all the bitter lessons of past wars.²⁰

Churchill himself described the strategic calamity as the “worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history”, but resented the tone of blame

¹⁹ Mass Observation Archive, FR 1173, *Warning the Daily Mirror*, March 24, 1942, Accessed December 15, 2016. <http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/SearchDetails/FileReport-1173?thumbnailIndex=1#Snippets>; Mass Observation Archive, FR 1176, *Salvage Paper; Daily Mirror*, March 27, 1942, accessed March 15, 2017, <http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/SearchDetails/FileReport-1176?thumbnailIndex=1#Snippets>; National Archive, Morale and Home Intelligence Reports 1941-1949, Collection 7465, *Weekly Report No. 77*, March 25, 1942 and *Weekly Report No. 78*, April 1, 1942.

²⁰ “After Singapore”, *Daily Mirror*, February 16, 1942, 3.

in a newspaper and his reaction was to regard the *Mirror* as a "serious obstacle to winning the war".²¹ The Prime Minister described the newspaper's coverage as a "stab in the back" and he was still fuming when the *Mirror* published Zec's cartoon less than three weeks later.²² Edelman wrote that the newspaper's journalists were delighted with the cartoon:

The *Mirror* had given a magisterial rebuke to those who were letting the forces down. From all over the country requests came from shops, from petrol stations and church halls for this moving and inspiring cartoon. Its traumatic effect had been salutary.²³

The public, too, according to Home Intelligence, did not interpret the cartoon as anti-government, seeing it as an attack on petrol wastage, but Churchill saw it in a very different light and one that Cudlipp also recognised with the benefit of hindsight.²⁴ The "patriotic cartoon", he conceded, was liable to two interpretations: "It was also a wicked cartoon. A cruel cartoon. A deplorable cartoon. A horrible cartoon."²⁵ That less-favourable verdict was shared by the Cabinet, who saw it as an allegation that sailors in the merchant navy were risking their lives for the benefit of fatter profits for petrol companies, and, worse, at the government's connivance. Churchill, who had written for the *Mirror* in the 1930s, wanted to close the paper and ordered an inquiry as to who owned it. Bartholomew and the editor Cecil Thomas were summoned to the Home Office where Herbert Morrison, the Home Secretary, described the cartoon as "worthy of Goebbels at his best".²⁶ They were also reminded that the *Daily Worker* had been suppressed in 1941 and that the *Mirror* could suffer the same fate – "if you are closed it will be for a long time... We shall act with a speed that will surprise you".²⁷ Meanwhile, Churchill told the editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, W. P. Crozier, that he resented the "constant stream of stuff which was calculated to undermine the moral [sic] of the soldier".²⁸ In another conversation with Crozier,

²¹ Winston S. Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate: The Second World War*, vol. 4 (London: Reprint Society, 1953), 88; Curran and Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*, 53.

²² Edelman, *The Mirror*, 110

²³ Edelman, *The Mirror*, 111.

²⁴ Home Intelligence, *Weekly Report No. 77*, March 25, 1942.

²⁵ Cudlipp, *Publish and be Damned*, 177.

²⁶ Hagerty, *Read All About It*, 52.

²⁷ Cudlipp, *Publish and be Damned*, 77.

²⁸ William P. Crozier, *Off the Record: Political Interviews 1933-1943*. London: Hutchinson, 1973), 312.

Churchill commented: “The paper I can’t stand, the worst of all, is the *Daily Mirror*... Yes, the *Daily Mirror*. It makes me spit”.²⁹

In a full-scale Parliamentary debate on March 19, 1942 the *Mirror*, which averaged daily sales of around 1.9 million, received a public attack that could hardly have been more damning.³⁰ Morrison, a member of the Labour party the *Mirror* supported, and a former contributor to the paper, said:

The cartoon in question is only one example, but a particularly evil example, of the policy and methods of a newspaper which, intent on exploiting an appetite for sensation and with a reckless indifference to the national interest and to the prejudicial effect on the war effort, has repeatedly published scurrilous misrepresentations, distorted and exaggerated statements and irresponsible generalisations.³¹

This was a vicious condemnation that did not go unchallenged in that same debate. The Labour MP Emmanuel Shinwell warned: “We are in danger of having the right of public opinion impinged upon, and that it fills some of us...with alarm and despondency”, while the former Secretary of State for War, Leslie Hore-Belisha, said: “A policy of suppression is calculated to do more harm to our cause and to divide the nation”. The response of the press followed quickly behind.

The Press

National newspapers had been compliant when the government had suppressed the Communist *Daily Worker* in January 1941, but were not as supine when it came to the *Daily Mirror* and the majority of national newspapers, fearing an attack on press freedom, sided with their rival. The *Daily Telegraph* supported a warning but not suppression, its owner Viscount Camrose telling the Lords: “The right to criticize is a fundamental part of a free press; in fact there could be no such thing as a free press without it; and all Governments, even Coalitions of all the parties, are better for it”.³² Two important regional newspapers, the *Birmingham Post*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 349-50.

³⁰ Curran and Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*, 58.

³¹ *Hansard*, HC Debate, March 19, 1942, 378, accessed November 26, 2016, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1942/mar/19/daily-mirror-cartoon>

³² *Hansard*, HL Debate, March 26, 1940, 122, accessed December 27, 2016, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1942/mar/26/freedom-of-the-press>

and the *Yorkshire Post*, also backed Morrison, although they were exceptions.³³

The Times, normally a supporter of Churchill, conceded that the government was “within the limits of right and duty” to suppress publications, but the grudging language suggested the newspaper had misgivings and this was reinforced by a warning:

Anything that tends to impede or impair the free play of opinion may do grave disservice to the interests of the state, above all in time of war, and recoil disastrously upon the administration that imposes it.³⁴

This was followed up a week later by another editorial in the same vein. “Without the constructive force of criticism,” it read, “it is unlikely this country would have survived the disasters of the past two years.”³⁵ A letter from MP Vernon Bartlett was also printed on March 31 emphasising the importance of the freedom of the press. It urged the Prime Minister to “make the effort to treat the press as an ally”.³⁶ Whether by coincidence, lack of sub-editorial imagination or an intentional pushing of a message by *The Times*, both pieces carried the same headline: “A free press”.

The *Manchester Guardian* had supported the government's suppression of the *Daily Worker*, in 1941 stating: “The *Daily Worker* did not believe in the war or in democracy; its only aim was to confuse and weaken. We can well spare it.”³⁷ Its position regarding the *Daily Mirror* was diametrically different and it was wholeheartedly against Morrison's public warning. An editorial on March 21 stated: “This is carrying authoritarianism too far” and six days later it added the government could not expect support when it created a procedure where it is “judge and executioner and deprives the accused of any recourse to the courts”.³⁸

The *Daily Mail* refrained from entering the debate, printing no editorials on the *Mirror* or press freedom, and the six articles that appeared concentrated mainly on the Parliamentary debates. The only indicator as to the newspaper's opinion on the matter was the extensive coverage of MPs and Lords speaking against the government warning,

³³ Lord Hartwell, *William Camrose: Giant of Fleet Street* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1992).

³⁴ “Regulation 2D”, *The Times*, March 20, 1942, 5.

³⁵ “A Free Press”, *The Times*, March 27, 1942, 5.

³⁶ “A Free Press”, *The Times*, March 31, 1942, 5.

³⁷ “The Daily Worker”, *Manchester Guardian*, January 22, 1941, 4.

³⁸ “Warning”, *Manchester Guardian*, March 21, 1942, 6; “War criticism”, *Manchester Guardian*, March 27, 1942, 4.

including those (above) who challenged Morrison in the Commons on the day the warning was issued.³⁹ When the Lords debated the issue the *Mail* focussed on Baron Vansittart, the former permanent secretary to the Foreign Office, who pointed out that a publication issued by the Duke of Bedford, *The Word*, had published an article that month “that goes far beyond anything attributed to the *Daily Mirror*”.⁴⁰ He added: “One could not measure sin by circulation”.

The *Daily Mirror* was in an invidious position in that too vigorous a defence could have led to further government reprisals, something it acknowledged in its editorial on the morning after Morrison’s attack. Nevertheless, the leading article asserted that “no more violent, no more cruel attack has ever been made by a Cabinet Minister upon a daily newspaper”.⁴¹ The following day, it let its rivals speak on its behalf, publishing comment pieces from nine newspapers. These included the *News Chronicle* that printed: “A policy of suppression of opinion is more likely to spread despondency and alarm and divide the nation than is any article”, and the left-leaning *Daily Herald*:

If such a cartoon is to be called “evil” – that was Mr Morrison’s word – and to be produced in justification of threats to suppress a newspaper, then we are coming dangerously near to what might prove a mortal assault on freedom of expression.⁴²

The coverage of the Parliamentary debate in the March 27 edition began on page one and filled all the editorial copy on pages 7 and 8, comprising a quarter of the whole newspaper.⁴³ The story was so long that there was a fear that readers might be deterred and a box on page 8 was included stating: “This looks dull, but READ IT” [the newspaper’s capitals]. The most dramatic reaction came in the Cassandra column on page 2, however, where the author of the diary of events and thoughts, Connor, announced he would be leaving the newspaper to join the army. His column, which included the barb “the only things that have been as numerous as the defeats have been the excuses”, read:

In the House of Commons you will have heard how criticism is received. The Government is extraordinarily sensitive. They are far too glib with the

³⁹ “Daily Mirror threatened”, *Daily Mail*, March 20, 1942, 4.

⁴⁰ “Press must be free – Lords”, *Daily Mail*, March 27, 1942, 3.

⁴¹ “For our readers”, *Daily Mirror*, March 20, 1942, 3.

⁴² “Press and Government”, *Daily Mirror*, March 21, 1942, 2, 6.

⁴³ “Daily Mirror’ warning debate by MPs”, *Daily Mirror*, March 27, 1942, 1, 7-8.

shameful rejoinder that those who do not agree with them are subversive – and even traitors.⁴⁴

He concluded: “Mr Morrison can have my pen – but not my conscience. Mr Morrison can have my silence – but not my self respect.”

This was a very public repudiation of the government's stance, but, behind the scenes, work was also being done on the *Mirror's* behalf in Downing Street. Beaverbrook, whose *Daily Express* had criticised both the *Daily Mirror* and the Home Office, but had also stressed “the purpose of this war is to enable every man to be able to speak his mind”, persuaded Churchill against suppression.⁴⁵ Crozier, the editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, also asked the Prime Minister in a separate conversation: “Why do you let one or two papers who nag by day disturb you so much?”⁴⁶ Churchill, confronted by these arguments, and with the great majority of Labour and Liberal MPs clearly critical, backed down and, according to Curran and Seaton, the *Mirror* was never again under the threat of suppression.⁴⁷ A campaign to end the ban of the *Daily Worker* followed and that was lifted on August 26, 1942.

The Public

Churchill “read more newspapers with greater attention than almost any other prime minister”, so it was unsurprising that the public's reaction to the *Mirror's* warning was closely monitored.⁴⁸ Indeed, the first assessment of opinion was written on March 24, 1942, only five days after Morrison's speech in the Commons, and it came in the shape of a memo from an unnamed official comprising three A4 pages written “ahead of full study and analysis”. The Home Secretary's comments had caused “considerable minor effect”, according to the writer, who was at pains not to commit him/herself too strongly, adding “opinion is in a fluid state pending further developments”. The author's analysis of the newspaper was:

The press overrates its own good will and importance to the public, and the *Daily Mirror* has the largest section of people who dislike it. At the same time, *Daily Mirror* readers tend to be more partisan and keen on their

⁴⁴ “Cassandra”, *Daily Mirror*, March 27, 1942, 2.

⁴⁵ “Opinion”, *Daily Express*, March 20, 1942, 2.

⁴⁶ Crozier, *Off the Record*, 313.

⁴⁷ Curran and Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility*, 16.

⁴⁸ Price, *Where Power Lies*, 115.

newspaper than any other newspaper readers. This appeal is especially to women and to men in the forces.⁴⁹

The author stated that disapproval came mainly from “middle-class people”. Referring to Morrison’s speech specifically, the writer suggested that most people disapproved, but added: “He is, of course, one of the least popular ministers.” Those that did approve “seldom did so with enthusiasm” and most people were “very surprised” at the government’s interpretation of Zec’s cartoon.

The report’s conclusion stated that the threat had been badly timed and not well presented. There are grounds for criticising the *Mirror*, it argued, but worried that any recriminations against the newspaper would not be understood by its readers and might cause the public to question other government restrictions. “There is no sign that the *Daily Mirror* depresses the morale of its readers more, for instance than the *Daily Express*. The *Daily Mirror*’s appeal is to the politically and culturally apathetic, the non-voter group.” A sense of public bewilderment was also noted by Home Intelligence a day later: “Few people appear to have interpreted the cartoon as the Home Secretary did.”⁵⁰

On March 27 another Mass Observation report about recently-introduced salvage regulations that threatened a £500 fine and two years’ imprisonment for wasting paper, also commented on the *Mirror*.⁵¹ The author had anticipated resistance to these new salvage laws, but was surprised to report that a Mass Observation survey had revealed support measuring at 73 per cent. The *Mirror* issue, however, had “disturbed” a “lot of people”. It added:

Suppression of any big national newspaper, whatever its views might be, do [sic] more harm than good. This is the sort of liberty which people are very reluctant to give up unless they are really convinced it is absolutely necessary.

Mischievously, the report also noted that the suppression of the *Mirror* would be a “terrific source of paper salvage” as the paper sold considerably more than a million copies a day.

On April 1 Home Intelligence reported:

⁴⁹ *Warning the Daily Mirror*.

⁵⁰ Home Intelligence, *Weekly Report No. 77*, March 25, 1942.

⁵¹ Mass Observation, *Broadcast for the Far East*.

The view is widely held that the *Mirror* is a "dirty little rag" but "the distinction drawn by the government between legitimate criticism and subversive attacks upon the war effort" is thought by some people to be invalid.⁵²

That comment was probably informed by evidence acquired by Mass Observation because the latter published "*Further Report on 'Daily Mirror'*" the following day. This was drawn from 300 interviews from "many parts of the country" and reported that people were "generally unfavourable" to the actions of the government in regards to the *Mirror* and that this feeling was growing in strength. Morrison, in particular, came in for criticism, several of the comments referring to his conscientious objections to fighting in the First World War. "Another dictator," was one comment; "Hitler would be better to know," another. A 50-year-old civil servant commented: "After the Daily Mirror affair I think he is a dangerous man, with a rather Fascist outlook," while a special policeman was quoted: "I don't like the Mirror's language and do not always like its sentiments, but this whole business is too dangerous."⁵³

Elsewhere, the report carried statistics that throw a light on the controversy, but also on the discourse between the *Mirror* and its readers. Nearly half the respondents disapproved of the newspaper but "most" of those did not feel suppression was justified and less than 25 per cent thought that even the threat of suppression was going too far. Around 20 per cent had seen Zec's cartoon, and five out of six of those had no criticism to make. The report added:

One result of this affair has been to increase the proportion of people who feel favourably towards the *Daily Mirror*, and a considerable number who have never read it would like to do so, they say.

One large army unit had been surveyed and only 3 per cent thought the newspaper did any harm among the soldiers.

While these results would have relieved *Mirror* staff, there was less encouraging evidence within the report that might also lead newspaper historians to question the effect of the radical rhetoric in the newspaper. The most notable was assertion that very few readers paid attention to the *Mirror*'s political and editorial comments, and that this was probably more so than "any other newspaper". It added:

⁵² Home Intelligence, *Weekly Report No. 78*, April 1, 1942.

⁵³ Mass Observation, *Further Report on 'Daily Mirror'*.

Many *Mirror* readers treat it purely as a sort of daily magazine centred around the unique page of strip cartoons. Plenty of people have been reading the *Daily Mirror* for years without realising that it makes tough political comments.

With that in mind, it was probably not surprising that the report found that *Mirror* readers were no more against the government, depressed or sceptical than readers of the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*.

Readers' Belief in News

The final Mass Observation report on the matter was published on April 30, 1942 and carried the most statistical evidence.⁵⁴ Replies were analysed from 200 people (109 men and 91 women), 95 of whom were aged under 40. The social class of the respondents was not requested, but the analysts studied the professions and derived that 67 were from the AB socio-economic group, 112 CD, with 21 unclassified. The reaction to Morrison's statement to the Commons was (in percentage terms):

Table 1. Opinion on Morrison's Warning to the *Daily Mirror*

	Male	Female	Both
Very much against warning	27	22	25
Against warning	28	24	26
In favour of warning	35	24	29
Not heard, vague, don't know	10	30	20

When this was broken down into the newspaper readership habits of the respondents, the percentages were:

Table 2. Opinion on Morrison's Warning by Newspaper Read

	Telegraph	Express	Chronicle
Anti	48	42	60
Pro	38	45	25
Vague, don't know	14	13	15
	Times	Mirror	More than one
Anti	34	50	62
Pro	53	12	25
Vague, don't know	13	38	13

⁵⁴ Mass Observation, *Daily Mirror Warning and News Belief*.

Table 1 shows that slightly more than half the respondents disapproved of the warning to the *Mirror*, a quarter strongly so. Only 29 per cent were in favour. Table 2 indicates that the proportion of undecided was fairly constant except for readers of the *Mirror*; opinion in favour of the warning was strongest among *Times* readers; *Express* readers also had a high proportion in favour of the warning even though the *Express* had opposed it editorially; readers of the *News Chronicle*, and those who read more than one paper, had the highest opposition to the warning; and the *Mirror*, unsurprisingly, had the fewest readers in favour of the warning, but also the highest number who were vague or didn't know about the issue. This section of the report concluded that it was a newspaper's long-standing policy that influenced readers, so *The Times*, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Telegraph* was bought by people who most strongly supported the government and, consequently many supported Morrison's warning. It added: "Editorial opinion on a specific issue that runs contrary to this 'traditional' policy makes little impression on readers' opinion." This confirmed, according to the report, past observations of the press in suggesting:

- a) That the press is able to confirm and strengthen already held opinion.
- b) It is less able to form new opinions, except over a long period.
- c) Newspapers are read primarily for opinion – confirmation, rather than opinion – stimulation.

The report also researched the levels of trust in readers. Asked whether the respondents believed what they read in their newspapers, they replied:

Table 3. Attitude to News

Readers' attitude	Percentage
Believe it	17
Believe it but...	4
Disbelief in "facts"	26
Not told everything	18
Critical of presentation	6
Believe radio, not newspapers	4
Isn't any news	2
Don't read or listen	5
Don't know, vague etc.	14
No reply	1
Unclassified	3

Thus 17 per cent believed the news was true without reservation and only 21 per cent had any trust at all. A further four per cent trusted what they heard on the radio, while 26 per cent mistrusted what they read and a further 18 per cent regarded the news as selective.

When the answers were broken down to the newspaper read and presented in proportion form:

Table 4. Opinion About the News

Newspaper read	Ratio of belief to other feelings
Telegraph	1: 1.1
Times	1: 2.5
Chronicle	1: 3.2
Express	1: 3.4
Mirror	1: 13.0

None of the *Daily Herald's* readers expressed unqualified belief in the news but the numbers were too small to be statistically significant.

The proportions expressing disbelief in the presentation according to the newspaper read were:

Table 5. Disbelief in the News

Newspaper read	Percentage of disbelieving readers
Mirror	36
Express	35
Chronicle	18
Telegraph	9
Times	6

Although the question referred to disbelief in news rather than belief in the newspapers read, it was clear that the readers of the *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Express* distrusted the news more than readers of *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph*. The report conceded that there was no “exact evidence” regarding reputation, but concluded that belief in news was “directly correlated with the long-term reputation for factual accuracy of the newspapers normally read”.

When these results are compared to a similar survey undertaken in April 1940 the conclusions were similar.⁵⁵ The first report was conducted

⁵⁵ Mass Observation Archive, FR 126, *Report on the Press*, May 22, 1940, accessed May 26, 2016,

in Limehouse, London, the respondents were “almost entirely working class” and, of the 131 interviews, 89 were with women. That survey found that only 24 per cent believed the news (compared to 21 per cent in 1942) and 57 per cent displayed degrees of scepticism (52 in 1942), and while the collection of data was different (door-to-door questions in a specific area in 1940 compared to indirect interviews conducted nationally in 1942) the distrust in the press was consistent. The earlier report also contained the telling comment : “In war-time when there is open censorship, everybody accepts that the government can choose what news about the war shall be published.”

Conclusion

None of the above made particularly comfortable reading for either the government or newspaper proprietors. This chapter has shown that there was long-standing distrust of the press, who provided the main form of communication between the authorities and the public, and throws light on the relationship between newspapers and the public in the Second World War, which was more nuanced than a simple top-down system of news production. Even the most trusted newspaper had more than one in 20 of its readers who did not believe what it was printing, while the subject of this chapter, the *Daily Mirror*, had more than one in three readers who thought their newspaper of choice was deceiving them. Hall's encoder-text-decoder communication model argued that readers are not passive recipients and derive different meanings from texts and this was substantiated by the Mass Observation findings that suggested the newspaper-buying public in the Second World War acknowledged their newspapers were influenced by censorship and propaganda and decoded it accordingly.⁵⁶ As Bingham wrote: “The journalist did not necessarily believe what he or she wrote, just as the reader did not necessarily believe what he or she read.”⁵⁷ Yet, when the government openly confronted the *Mirror* and threatened it with closure, the public showed equal scepticism towards their rulers, countering the “all in this together” message that was being promoted from Downing Street. The focus of the attack was on

<http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/SearchDetails/FileReport-126?thumbnailIndex=1#Snippits>

⁵⁶ Stuart Hall, “Encoding/Decoding”, in *Media Studies: A Reader*, edited by Paul Marris and Sue Thornham, 2nd edn, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 51-61.

⁵⁷ Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), 11.

Morrison, but there was an undercurrent of wider criticism that included the government as a whole.

The attention paid to the subject by Mass Observation and Home Intelligence at the government's behest, indicated the concern in the Cabinet, and with justification. While the national press usually bent when it came under pressure from Downing Street – “The media were subjected to the most sustained campaign of official bullying they had ever seen and almost in unison they rolled over and asked for more.” – on this occasion it resisted.⁵⁸ Vested interest undoubtedly stiffened that resolve and Fleet Street's defiance was bolstered by politicians in both Houses and by public opinion. The *Mirror* was not to all tastes, but concerns about maintaining press freedom over-rode personal preferences and that generic urge to protect the right to criticise is an indicator that the relationship between Downing Street, the press and the British people was more complex than the straightforward narrative of the Second World War: government coercion, propaganda and news suppression and a receptive public. This was reinforced when the subsequent campaign successfully petitioned for the restoration of the *Daily Worker*, which returned to the streets of Britain in autumn 1942 after a suppression that lasted 20 months.

Nevertheless, the government's action was serious enough to place newspapers on their guard for the rest of the war. Harrison wrote that the threat of Defence Regulation 2D – that allowed the suppression of any publication that was perceived to threaten security – loomed over all editors and “unofficial proposals were mooted for the closing down of all newspapers except *The Times*, the *Daily Herald* and the *Daily Express*”.⁵⁹ The *Daily Mirror*, which, according to Koss, “minded its ways without quite mending them”, continued to attack examples of inefficiency but not on the scale of Spring 1942, although it did play a significant role in the defeat of Churchill and the Conservative Party in the General Election of 1945.⁶⁰ Zec continued to draw cartoons for the *Mirror* until 1954 and Connor, who served in Italy with the British Army with Cudlipp where they worked on the forces newspaper *Union Jack*, returned to write as Cassandra in 1946. His first column began: “As I was saying when I was interrupted...”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Price, *Where Power Lies*, 94.

⁵⁹ Stanley Harrison, Stanley. *Poor Men's Guardians: A Survey of the Struggle for a Democratic Newspaper Press 1763-1973* (Southampton: Camelot, 1974), 210.

⁶⁰ Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* (London: Hamilton, 1984)

⁶¹ “Cassandra”, *Daily Mirror*, September 23, 1946, 4.

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