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Propaganda Sheets

Trust in the press declined during the Second World War, as did its influence

By Guy Hodgson

As the first shots were fired in the Second World War, the British newspaper industry was either at its zenith or very near to it. The country was served by 34 daily newspapers (nine national), there were 16 national and provincial Sundays, and the three London evenings were supplemented by a further 77 in towns and cities across the nation. A survey conducted by Political and Economic Planning reported that in 1934 every 100 British families bought 95 morning and 57.5 evening newspapers every day and 130 Sunday newspapers every week. Two press barons, Lords Beaverbrook and Rothermere, formed their own political party in the 1930s and the former would serve in Churchill's Cabinet during the war. Profits rose during the conflict and circulations increased by an average of 86.5 per cent from 1937 to 1947, so a golden age? Not quite.

The principal intrusion on this optimistic vista was a decline in influence. Paradoxically, as more people bought its editions, Fleet Street's position as the first point for news declined from 1939 to 1945 as a different form of newspaper arrived in readers' homes: radio. By 1944 the BBC's 9 pm news programme was estimated to reach 43 to 50 per cent of the population and the BBC recorded its audience at 34 million (out of a population of 48 million). The wireless had assumed the greatest prominence as purveyor of wartime events, and had retained a trust by the public that had been lost to newspapers. The First World War had eroded faith in what was being reported and this decline was hastened when the British, brought into the front line for the first time by The Blitz, could compare what was appearing on the front pages to what was happening outside

their front doors. A report for Home Intelligence in 1941 noted: “There is much underlying scepticism about the news.”

The problems facing Fleet Street in the Second World War were practical and philosophical. Apart from the logistical difficulties of producing editions while bombs were falling on and around newspaper offices – the printing of the *Manchester Guardian* was disrupted by 11 incendiaries landing on its roof on 23 December 1940 – there was also the issue of transporting newspapers when roads and rail lines were damaged or destroyed. Production difficulties were compounded by reduced resources and, by the end of 1943, more than a third of the nation’s 9,000 journalists had been called up by the armed forces, more were employed by the government, and only around 25 per cent of staff photographers remained in Fleet Street. Newsprint, too, was rationed and restrictions were put on circulation, so that newspapers could increase sales only by reducing the number of their pages. The Royal Commission on the Press 1947-1949, reporting that the 1.25 million tons of newsprint used annually before the war came down to 350,000 tons in 1948, recorded that newspapers were reduced by as much as 80 per cent between 1939 and 1945. It added: “Much news must be ‘suppressed’ for this reason alone and severe compression makes inaccuracy and distortion difficult to avoid. The likelihood that the Press will be subject of complaints is increased.”

Another practical difficulty was the censor. Every war-related report had to endure trial by blue pencil and an official from the Ministry of Information frequently had a desk in newspaper offices. News was also controlled because much of it stemmed from the news agencies, Reuters and the Press Association, and their reports were altered at source. In theory this censorship was

“voluntary” but as the chief censor, George Thomson, noted that editors were issued with such a barrage of D-notices that the restrictions “covered nearly every conceivable human activity”. Reports on bombing were curtailed, casualty numbers distorted if they appeared at all and targets camouflaged so that raids on Bristol, for example, would be reported as a South-West town. Photographs, too, were restricted, put into a pool for general distribution, and subject to lengthy delay. Unsurprisingly, this caused frustration among journalists whose *raison d’etre* was to produce news as promptly and accurately as possible. The *Daily Express* vented its anger by reporting that Britain might soon have to leaflet raid itself to tell its people how the war was going, although there were several instances, the imminent German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 being a prime example, when newspapers decided to suppress the information on their own accord.

This suggested a mood of acquiescence and that philosophy was borne out by the news pages. Reluctance to hand the enemy propaganda missiles ensured the press rarely held national or local to account and British morale was reported as being resolutely, and unwaveringly, upbeat. When the Luftwaffe raided emphasis was laid on the bombs that hit schools, churches, hospitals and homes while the RAF’s sorties always destroyed munitions factories, airfields and transport infrastructure. There were frequent exceptions to the smooth co-operation between Fleet Street and the authorities, the suppression of the *Daily Worker* and the threat by Churchill to close the *Daily Mirror* after a Zec cartoon in 1942 was read as an attack being the most blatant examples, but the threat of sanction, and the potential for a wartime *British Gazette*, the government-

sponsored newspaper published during the General Strike, ensured general compliance.

The result was that reporting of the war was weighted. Charles Lynch, of Reuters, infamously recorded that it was humiliating to revisit what journalists produced - "It was crap... We were a propaganda arm of our governments." - but Cyril Dunn, a *Yorkshire Post* journalist who would later work for *The Observer*, was more specific. Visiting survivors of a bomb-out pub he met a man who wanted only to "get out of here" and woman who said: "If only I could feel it was worth it". Dunn noted their quotes in his notebook and then ignored them. "I wrote the usual story about the cheerful courage and determined endurance of the Manchester folk."