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Letters to the Editor as a tool of citizenship

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This chapter looks at how an examination of nineteenth century letters to the editor in Britain allows us to reinterpret ideas of civic engagement. Such letters are most often approached through the lens of a Habermassian (Habermas, 1989) formation of the 'public sphere' (Hampton,2004: Dahlgren, 2013; Garnham, 1986; Curran, 1991). In such a perspective, 'civic engagement' is understood as an appraisal of issues which are pre-selected as of 'public' significance, sharp divisions are maintained between information (and information providers) and 'opinion', and an ideal of objectivity is used as a reference point (if often honoured only in its breach).

This kind of approach has dominated historical approaches to reader correspondence. When Jones (1996), for example, sought to rescue nineteenth century reader letters from the condensation of historical accounts—which treated them as merely 'an inexpensive space-filler conveniently provided by the passionate or the vain'—he described them instead as 'the very health element in the English newspaper', an essential means of 'feeling the national pulse', and 'a form of political representation which, if not so decisive as the casting of a vote, was more sensitive and complex' (1996, 187–8). Such an intervention was, of course, timely, but it still positioned reader commentary as a manifestation of pre-existing conversations already occurring elsewhere, a view shared by mid-Victorian editors. As Hampton has argued, there is a neat fit between this Habermassian 'depiction of a rational space between individuals and the state … (and) … an ideal that permeated mid-Victorian elite society … an ideal of politics by public discussion … on the "questions of the day"' (2004, 8–9). The model of the rationally debating citizen was central in the creation of discourses of journalism (Chalaby, 1998; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007) in the early nineteenth century, giving way to the 'journalism of representation' towards the end of the century (Hampton, 2004). There are, then, good reasons to begin with this version of the public sphere when looking at nineteenth century letters to the editor.

Scholars examining our own era, however, question the ease of this fit, and find instead a need to reimagine the concept of civic engagement. Quite apart from wider critiques of Habermas' public sphere more generally (cf. Fraser, 1990; Curran, 1991; Örnebring, 2007), there has been a growing concern with how Habermassian ideas trade on common sense identifications of 'public issues'. Papacharissi, for example, argues that the era of social media is characterised by an emergent tension between the public and the private, where the private threatens to overtake the public in social and political significance. 'The citizen in a representative democracy, previously enabled within the public sphere and through civic deliberation, is now enabled via a private sphere and through the use of private media environments' (Papacharissi, 2009: 39). Accounts such as this tend to see the transition from public issues to private ones as an artefact of technological change, sometimes imagined positively as a form of empowerment. This runs counter to Habermas' argument that the increasing emphasis on the personal represents the retreat of the political from the public mind through the commercialisation of media.

However, as Papacharissi also points out, '(a)rguments that connect civic engagement, the public sphere, and the commercialization of mass media frequently rest on a premise that

overestimates and romanticizes political activity in previous eras' (2009: 32). They also underestimate the historical 'political-ness' of the 'mundane'. As Dumitrica and Bakardjieva have argued, '(m)undane communication and action are the "pre-political" domain where citizens work out their positions by means of interaction with others' (2017: 819). Defining engagement, they argue, is intimately tied up with evaluating the legitimacy and 'worth' of its different forms (ibid, 819). Nineteenth century newspapers played a pivotal role in this evaluative process, in a manner that was both classed (Hampton, 2004) and gendered (Chapman, 2013; Lonsdale, 2015; Bingham, 2009).

In this chapter, I examine three issues that are central to applying contemporary construals of citizen participation to nineteenth century media. Firstly, I will describe the ways in which readers' letters constituted public issues, and how the platform of letters to the editor provided a space for both the expression of private concerns and their crystallisation into matters of wider significance. Letters to the editor are often dismissed as expressions of private grievance, but here I argue that the nineteenth century press provided a space in which the personal could *become* political. I will discuss this with reference to a case study of letters concerning the Victorian Post Office.

Although it is important to see reader letters as 'pre-political', rendering issues of communal concern visible, visibility is not in itself influence, as we can see in our own era. The space of 'appearances' is distinct from the space of influence. In his analysis of the mechanisms of deliberative democracy, Dryzek explores this tension, arguing that political systems are democratic only to the degree that they build deliberative capacity, that is 'the extent to which a political system possesses structures to host deliberation that is authentic, inclusive and consequential' (Dryzek, 2009: 1382). An ideal-typical deliberative system requires five elements: (1) an operative public space, that is an arena in which opinion is unrestricted; (2) an empowered space, 'a deliberative space for actors, recognizably part of institutions producing collective decisions' (Dryzek, 2009: 1385); (3) transmission, the means by which public space can influence empowered space, formally or informally, critically or supportively; (4) accountability, including mechanisms of justification; and finally, (5) decisiveness, 'some means whereby these first four elements are consequential in influencing the content of collective decisions' (Dryzek, 2009: 1386). This emphasises the idea that a public sphere must be a forum for opinion that is *consequential* as well as *open*, safeguarding it from a decline into mere spectacle. Only where debate is seen as consequential can a public sphere be invested with meaning for those who participate in it, preventing it from degenerating into an imagined anomic space of political apathy and disengagement. For this to hold, then, the public sphere has to face onto formal institutions of power. Secondly, then, I will show that Victorian letter writers understood the papers as just such an empowered sphere.

Finally, I will explore how letters pages show how readers learned to perform citizenship as writers. I will argue, in line with recent approaches to mediated citizenship, that Victorian writers learned to 'perform' citizenship through engagement with the press. As Edwards (2018) has argued in the context of modern public relations systems, people learn to be citizens not abstractly and theoretically but concretely through encountering themselves and others in contexts which emphasise public relevance. Edwards argues that 'individuals learn to distinguish different relations between themselves and others, and recognise their

own responsibilities as members of society' (Edwards, 2018: 321) through being part of, and by being recognised as a member of, the public. In media-centric societies such as our own validation and recognition are achieved through engagement with and participation in mediated spaces, and part of becoming a 'full' citizen is learning to present effective mediated personae. In the nineteenth century, however, such processes of cultural mediatisation were in their infancy. By looking at letters to the editor, however, we can discern early manifestations of how citizens learned to interact with the press in the performance of cultural citizenship.

This work is based on analyses of a set of archival data of nineteenth century newspapers made available through Gale/Cengage, including *The Times* digital archive, *The Daily Telegraph* historical archive (1855 onwards), *The Daily Mail* historical archive (1896 onwards), and selected newspapers accessed through the database Nineteenth Century UK Periodicals. The archives are searchable using filters for document types within publications and categories. The method may be imprecise, and variations in useful results are an artefact of different forms of data classification, but an overall trend is clear: that the space for letters increased over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The archives were sampled at intervals covering the period from 1845 through to the end of the century. There are wide variations in the numbers of letters published annually. The weekly *John Bull*, for example, published between 230 and 463 letters annually in the period between 1845 and 1875, while *The Daily Telegraph* returns results of between 221 and 891 over the period 1867 to 1890. *The Times* remained the most consistent publisher, offering between 2380 and 3213 letters a year between 1867 and 1890. *The Daily Mail* published 576 letters in 1896, a figure that had risen to 1710 a decade later in 1906. The papers were chosen to reflect a spectrum of national audiences and to provide for continuity over the period, with *The Times* representing the voice of a largely metropolitan elite, as against the broader audience for the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph.*

Newspapers as empowered spaces

The first issues to be addressed are the extent to which we can see newspapers, and the public sphere created by correspondence within them, as 'empowered spaces' and what the nature of this empowerment might be. Nineteenth century letters to newspapers potentially play two roles within the formal classification proposed by Dryzek (see above). First, unproblematically enough, they are clearly a space of transmission, porting ideas between the public and formally empowered spaces. However, insofar as they form an element *within* an arena which is empowered in its own right, they are also part of the formal sphere. This can be seen in two key respects.

Firstly, and most obviously, reader letters themselves instantiate the category of the empowered sphere *in their own right* insofar as they form a publicly legible part of an ongoing empowered process occurring elsewhere. Letter 'pages' give ample testament of the extent to which politicians and officials spoke through the letters pages to each other, carrying on deliberations that were already occurring behind closed doors or in more formal settings of decision making. *The Times* especially is a rich source for correspondence of this nature. See, for example, a letter from A. G. Jeans which opens,

> Sir- Mr Arnold Morley's answer to Mr Jackson in the House of Commons last night on the subject of my recent letter in the Times begs the question' (*The Times*, 9 April 1895)

Such letters are clearly in a category that amplifies the voices of the elite, something which is troubling for accounts of the public sphere in which access is a seen as the key factor in its operation. It is for this reason that readers' letters are often disregarded as being a mere elaboration or confirmation of more definitive evidence available elsewhere. We can see some degree of diversification, however, even within this category. Public conversations, as carried out through the letters sections, often took on a technical as well as a specifically political character, as matters of expertise were deliberated through multiple successive letters on a range of issues. Here the nature of 'empowerment' of the citizen writer is through their *expertise* rather than their status, mirroring wider shifts in nineteenth century society (Perkin, 1989; Hampton, 2004).

Of broader significance is the orientation by readers who had more restricted access to formal channels of power, whether through direct representation or what we might now call 'cultural capital', towards the newspapers. They clearly understood the letters pages as spaces which opened out onto formal power. It is true, of course, that the conventions of letter writing for publication imposed the persona of the supplicant upon the letter writer. Thus, letters commonly open with deferential salutations: 'Dear Sir, kindly allow me space in your valuable paper for the insertion of the following', for example. 'Sir, - most humbly and gratefully I beg to thank you for your kindness in laying my case before the public' opens one letter from William Brightwell (*The Times*, 8 January 1886). 'I am sure if I can once more enlist your most valuable assistance …we shall again succeed' begins another (*The Times*, 14 January 1890). Nevertheless, it is also clear that this went beyond mere polite forms of address. Readers perceived the publications with whom they corresponded as possessing a power of recognition and validation (see below), and corresponding with the editor was understood as accessing a gateway to power.

Two examples here serve to illustrate this point. Firstly, the case of 'An Honest Cabman' wherein a correspondent, J.P., relates the experience of losing a purse in a cab and having the money returned to him:

> I gave him 5l, and much commendation for his honesty, and before he went away he said that he had a little favour to ask, and that was to have it put in *The Times* that "there really was such a thing as an honest cabman."

The editor responded to this with a note to the effect that he had confidence in the honesty of the London cabmen as a body (*The Times*, 6 April 1867). Here *The Times* is construed as a formal space of adjudication of reputation, here of the class of cabmen as a whole both by J.P. but also, and significantly (if we can take this at face value) by the cabman himself. Similarly to the case of William Brightwell, who I have discussed elsewhere (Cavanagh, 2013), the cabman is a media literate metropolitan who, though not of the 'imagined' audience of *The Times,* is nevertheless a sophisticated interpreter of newspaper power.

By contrast, in a second example, from *The Telegraph* (3 September 1867), the author, R Parrot, Vicar of Amwell protests at the enclosure of common land by 'avaricious landlords'.

> No meeting of the parishioners was called to ask their sanction to the enclosure ; and, as vicar of the parish and guardian of the poor, I protest against it and want to ascertain where redress can be obtained, and whether such wanton robbery- for robbery it is- can be allowed.

Here, likewise, there is a call to the newspaper as a court of appeal. The vicar, though himself a man of status in his role as 'guardian of the poor', finds himself excluded from a sphere of local power (Dryzek, 2009, see above) but identifies *The Telegraph* as a likely conduit to, if not representative of, a wider empowered sphere. For 'ordinary' readers, then, the space provided by newspapers allowed them to access what they saw as a broader and more legitimate sphere of power than those encountered in daily life.

Moreover, whilst nineteenth century writers clearly saw newspapers as possessing power, they also tended to see the editor as one who was empowered *against* vested interest, potentially one of 'us' rather than one of 'them'. Consider, for example, this letter from E. J. Kibblewhite, editor of *English Mechanic*, who wrote to *The Times* to protest at the 'high-handed and unwarrantable interference on the part of the Post-Office authorities' in judging whether a publication was 'news'. If 'discretion is left to the Postmaster-General to interpret the will of parliament, it is only fair and reasonable that that discretion should be exercised with consideration. Surely, even if the Postmaster-General is to refuse at his sole pleasure to admit newly-started journals to the benefits of registration, it was never intended that he should be enabled autocratically to withdraw them from papers like ours'. This he sees as leading to underhanded censorship of the press and as 'another instance of the vexatious persistence with which St-Martin's-le-Grand has always harassed newspaper publishers' (*The Times*, 14 January 1890).

Kibblewhite was not alone in his concerns. The publisher of the weekly magazine *John Bull* also took to *The Times* to protest the vagaries of the postal service in delaying delivery of newspapers such that their currency was undermined (*The Times* 19 November 1873 and 2 October 1873). In both of these cases *The Times* letters are seen as space for reining in the power of that most visible sign and concrete embodiment of state power: the Post Office (Joyce, 2013). *The Times*, as a newspaper of record, was regarded as an empowered space, possessing powers greater than a mere ability to publicise and amplify the views of representatives of nineteenth century elite and literary culture.

In part this identification derived from a sense of familiarity which letter writing for publication engendered. As Brant (2006) pointed out, one formal feature of letters is an intimate mode of address. 'Familiarity was the price paid for that singleness of epistolary voice … which dissociated the genre from dangerous mass politics' (Brant, 2006: 176). Newspapers cultivated exactly this sense of personal involvement and identification with their readership (Warren, 2000; Conboy, 2010; Chapman, 2013). As Warren points out, with regard to women's magazines in the nineteenth century, a publication's success 'was in large part due to its formulation of a textual or 'corporate' identity – inextricably linked to

its successful appeal to its targeted audience' which 'the appearance of the reader … serves … to specify and consolidate' (Warren, 2000: 123). The adoption of a mode of discourse which promoted this identification (Conboy, 2010), and a sense of membership of a newspaper community—the 'we'—was key to market success. However, this identification underpinned the sense of the paper being separate from more abstract institutions of authority.

Writers as empowered citizens

There is a sense in which letters provided, for some writers, an education and training in citizenship centred around *recognition*. Recent analyses of letter writing as a textual practice emphasise its transformative nature. Chartier (1997) and Vincent (1993, cited in Joyce, 2013), for example, link the rise of the letter writer and that of the citizen, seeing in epistolary practice a technology of individuality, bringing into being the notion of an 'interior self'. Letter writing for publication complicates this 'self'. Brant, in her work on eighteenth century epistolary culture, argues that letter writing for publication was key to the development of the political citizen. Letters, she argues, mirrored the format of political debate, insofar as the "dialogical nature of correspondence matched the interrogatory nature of political exchange" (Brant, 2006: 171). Letters encoded participation insofar as they presupposed and demanded a response.

There is abundant evidence of this kind of responsive two-way communication between the letter writers and newspaper editors, in addition to that between one letter writer and another. Thus, for example, *Daily Mail* correspondents like 'Liberty Hall' wrote to 'express my hearty concurrence with the letter in yesterday's issue, signed "Common Sense"' (*Daily Mail*, 5 August 1896), whilst "A Widow" responded to a letter published previously from "A Woman" criticising the *Daily Mail*'s position on women as wives and mothers

> I do not quite agree with "A Woman" who writes that "women do not need to trouble to be useful to a country that denies them a voice in its government, but robs them to pay its debts (*Daily Mail*, 12 August 1902).

There are ample examples of conversations between correspondents and editors over extended periods as issues evolved in character. Thus, 'Justice' wrote to *John Bull* in 1875:

> Some little time back you kindly inserted in your valuable newspaper a letter from me on Vivisection. Since then I have been gratified by finding that this practice is more extensively known and condemned than I imagined (*John Bull*, 9 October 1875).

Likewise, former MP Edward Norris continued his correspondence with the *Times*:

> I should hardly have ventured to address you again on the impropriation of tithes, respecting which you have done me the favour to insert two letters, but for a very significant and important announcement (9 December 1905).

More significantly though, such letters demand a specific type of response, which foregrounds civility and the generation of agreement, or at least polite disagreement. As Brant argues about the eighteenth century, the 'fantasy of irrational citizens becoming rational readers was less wild in the context of letters where persuasion was often fictionalised as polite … Civility and citizen shared a common etymology in *civis*, hence epistolary civility helped define civil society' (2006: 175).

Nineteenth century letters often blurred this 'civility' into theatricality, as an elaborate performance of deference and courteousness. As Ackroyd has noted, in a different context, historians 'have often been amazed by the prolixity and ardour of the members of the nineteenth-century parliament … Never has a period been so concerned to give the right impression' (2018: 11). Letter writers were no more immune. Brant also observed this of eighteenth-century writers who drew on satirical and theatrical conventions in the creation of anonymised epistolary personae. Such writers, she argues, used a 'cultural shorthand' blending high and low culture, and using iconic national and historical figures as resources. In so doing, they simultaneously 'resemble masquerades' in which wider social tensions of class are enacted and 'project an identity in possession of something authentic' (2006: 181). Such personae, she argues, encoded *distance*, allowing writers to take 'a middle ground between organised interests and populist disorder' (2006: 174), in speaking 'for the people', and by assuming a 'universal identity' (Brant: ibid).

In these letters similar adoptions and borrowings are evidenced by the uses of universalised and dramaturgical *noms de plume*. References to virtues or abstract qualities—'Justice', 'A Sympathiser with the Oppressed', 'Veritas', 'Citizen', 'A Lover of Liberty', 'A Friend of Liberty', 'Temperance'—are often used as pen-names, in addition to the more prosaic use of expertise as a source of identity, e.g. 'A Physician of Forty Years Standing', 'An M.P.', 'A Life Governor', 'An Old Whip'. It is also noteworthy that 'Tax Payer', 'Rate Payer', 'One Who Pays Income Tax', and 'One who already pays a house tax' are also used as key identifiers. The ready adoption of 'John Bull' or 'An Admirer of John Bull' as pseudonyms is also relevant in this context.

Letter writers were often at pains to assume a distanced, depersonalised tone in letters. Mateus (2018), drawing on Chalaby (1996), points to the significance of the performative in creating the 'truthiness' of journalism and, in particular, the central role played by the eclipse of the self from the journalistic voice. 'Outside the editorial we rarely see the journalist pronouncing himself as a subject or an individual subjectivity in order to ensure there is a mimetic effect between what he (re) presents and what is actually happening' (Mateus, 2018: 70). The depersonalised tone of many letters is an affectation of this mimesis. In these senses, letters provided a way for citizens to demonstrate knowledge of the conventions of the use of public reason. Rationality was enacted as civility, and citizenship as impartiality and universality.

The constitution of 'public issues'

Securing recognition was about more than modes of address. It was tied to speech on issues which provoked a public response. One characteristic of correspondence was the appearance of multiple time delimited 'rallies' of letters and overlapping replies which

flared briefly but passionately (cf. Cohen, 1972). One particularly dramatic example of this is recorded in the work of Robson (1995) on *The Telegraph* and the question of marriage versus celibacy. Whilst sometimes such outbursts of concern are of great consequence, feeding into wider social and political agenda, in the majority of cases such rallies spark and die quickly leaving little but the record of their own occurrence behind. Nevertheless, the passions mobilised by these rallies showed a degree of public investment. A key index used to examine such letters is the extent to which they were initially reactive or proactive (see Nord, 2001): whether writers advocated for their own agendas as opposed to responding to editorials and news items within the publication. Such considerations allow us to gain a sense of direction of leadership and reaction.

There is another sense in which letters brought to the fore the idea of public issues, which is how people mobilised their own concerns into claims to be speaking on behalf of a broader group. This is foregrounded in letters which deal with those most commonplace of subjects of grievance, encounters between everyday citizens and the mechanisms of an abstract state. Unsurprisingly, considered as a body, letters show a consistent concern with the everyday 'grudge'. In the nineteenth century press, from magazines to newspapers, regional to national, populist or elite, letters give testament to a deeply held wrath against 'the insolence of office' and a desire to use the platform of the press to call it to account. Letters on the iniquities of train services, the inefficiency of government offices and the abject state of transport are common themes.

Nowhere, it seems, did passions flare so brightly as in the case of complaints about the Post Office. Over the period after the introduction of the Penny Post (1840) we see an array of public concerns expressed over a large range of issues, from the variability of postal deliveries, Post Office mismanagement, the trustworthiness of postal employees, inconvenient hours of operation, the nature of Post Office employment and personnel, and the incomprehensibility of postage rates. Perhaps this should not come as a surprise. As De Quincey noted the postal system and exaltation of privilege had long been connected in the public mind. He writes,

> No dignity is perfect which does not at some point ally itself with the mysterious. The connexion of the mail with the state and the executive government—a connexion obvious, but yet not strictly defined—gave to the whole mail establishment an official grandeur which did us service on the roads, and invested us with seasonable terrors ….We, on our parts (we, the collective mail, I mean), did our utmost to exalt the idea of our privileges by the insolence with which we wielded them. Whether this insolence rested upon law that gave it a sanction, or upon conscious power that haughtily dispensed with that sanction, equally it spoke from a potential station; and the agent, in each particular insolence of the moment, was viewed reverentially, as one having authority (1912: 8-9)

As Joyce (2013) argues, the Post Office became, over the course of the nineteenth century, *the* central institution of the state, gradually extending its reach later by taking key roles in the emergent technologies of broadcasting, tucking telegraphy and telephony into its remit, as well as providing financial services and insurance. In the UK, lacking a large army, it was the 'face' of the state, collecting revenues from animal, gun and later car licenses and having (after 1868) its own volunteer army division (The Post Office Rifles). After 1908, the

Post Office also paid out state benefits and pensions. Its visibility (Joyce, 2013: 131) served to warrant its power, with its recognisable insignia of office. In key respects the Post Offices were 'a good part of the social and economic management of everyday life in fact, *were* the state, the state *performed*' (2013: 85).

This performance was not limited to the office itself. The arrival of the Penny Post revolutionised the relationship between citizen and state. It initially universalised postal provision—which had otherwise been patchy and inconsistent—but by so doing displaced more traditional modes of connection and communication, interpolating the individual into an impersonal social-technical system (Joyce, 2013: 70). The individual was collapsed into their address, becoming a fixed geographical point in a network which, as a by-product, collapsed citizenship rights into the address; being of no fixed address came to mean being 'outside the realm of civil rights and civil identity' (Joyce, 2013: 90). At the same time, this new hybrid of person and place extended the experience of integration within a broader national entity by inducing a sense of permanent connectedness', the Post Office network was always available, thus the citizen was also likewise accessible, even when not being directly addressed (Joyce, 2013: 121). All 'addressed' citizens may not have been on a level of equality, but the fact of being equally an addressee at least introduced a level of parity. The Post Office, then, reconfigured the citizen into a fixed point in a system and '(l)earning to live in a *system* involved … blurring of boundaries between inner and outer selves' (Joyce, 2013: 41). '(J)ust as the electricity system of modern France took on the aura of French national identity, so too did the British Post Office take on that of Britain as a nation, an empire, and later on a state that belonged to the "people", as in the ideas of the "People's Post"' (Joyce, ibid).

This sense of ownership and identification is made clear in many letters. As one correspondent to *The Times* wrote, 'pray what other government office is of one-tenth the importance to the public that the Post-office is? Post-office clerks are, therefore, more immediately the servants of the public' (31 October 1845). Walter Coote, speaking for those who have not 'fallen down and worshipped the golden image' of the Post Office, nevertheless acknowledged the central place the institution occupied in the public imaginary; 'the public I know regard this institution as something almost sacred in its efficiency and virtue' (*The Times*, 14 January 1890).

With ownership came an equal sense of injustice, often coming to a head around lack of equality in coverage. A letter on 'The Post Office in the Provinces' concerning the poor quality of service in North Wales was signed 'An Inhabitant of the Aggrieved District' (*The Times* 1 May 1860). The lack of a nationally effective service was also a grievance for the '29,000 Victims of the Post Office' for whom the writer of a letter on 'Post to the Hebrides' claimed to speak. 'We hear of hundreds of thousands contributed by the Post Office to the national funds. Can it not do its duty at home first, and supply the wants of a number of Her Majesty's Income tax paying subjects?' (*The Times*, 18 November 1873).

Concerns with the over-layering of the personal by the abstract, the local by the systemic, were made legible in, and animated the writers of, these letters. One correspondent questioned whether the Post Office was 'not playing *à l'empereur*?' 'What law', he queried, 'is there obliging the public to submit *notens volens* to orders from the Post Office on pain

of summary punishment?' (*The Daily Telegraph,* 19 September 1859). For others, the blurring of boundaries of bureaucratic and private selves were experienced more sharply. W.F. Mack and co. expressed bafflement at the overlaying of geography by bureaucracy, bemoaning the need to pay a guinea registration fee to have post redirected, when 'the postman is at no trouble in sorting and delivering' to the two registered business premises since they were on the same postal round (*Daily Mail,* 23 March 1898,). Likewise 'H.G.B' wrote:

> Sir-does the Post Office exist for the benefit of those who write and receive letters, or to draw out of our pockets the *maximum* of revenue for the *minimum* of service? I have just changed my residence. On giving the usual notice at the Post Office here, I was informed that it could not be received because my previous address was the College of which I am a Fellow. Inquiry at the G.P.O elicited the reply that 'it is contrary to the practice of the department to redirect letters officially when they can be redirected at the place of address' … I would ask (1) what right the department has to impose on a reasonable convenience to the public an arbitrary distinction which destroys most part of its value … Meanwhile I am to be punished for having once lived within the walls of a college by having my correspondence delayed until every one who has occasion to write to me has learned my new address (*The Times,* 17 September 1895).

More poignantly, from 'A.W':

> I removed two years ago, leaving my new address at the Post Office, expecting that some day my dear boy, if he is living, would write to me. A few weeks ago a Post-Office official called upon me, asking for a guinea for the address to be renewed. A guinea! I work a fortnight for that amount, and have three children to keep. I now learn that a letter was received at my old address from America. It would be from my own dear, dear boy. He left his home four years ago, and I shall never, never hear from him again. I understand the letter was sent to the dead-letter office, opened there and sent back to America. What will the poor boy think and suffer? (Daily Mail, 10 May 1898)

These letters express concerns that what is seen as a service is actually an abstract set of rules and practices which constrain the individual. The concerns are expressed in highly emotive terms: rage in the case of H.B.G. and grief in that of A.W. In an era dominated, as Joyce further notes, by the fantasy of a state abstracted from emotion 'rooted in the belief that calculation, standardisation and abstraction provide rational answers to rationally conceived "problems"' (Joyce, 2013: 12), the language of emotion, sometimes theatrically enacted (see above) is rhetorically effective in 'speaking back to power', contrasting with the depiction of the post-office as a machinery of bureaucracy.

Correspondents struggled with the impersonal in a further sense: the requirement to place their trust in an abstract institution. Writers frequently expressed fears that the contents of letters were read or purloined by workers at the Post Office: that letters might be 'Grahamed', a term coined after the Mazzini affair to refer to the activities of Sir James Graham in opening letters—which itself became a byword for 'Post Office tyranny and mismanagement' (*New York Herald*, August 5 1844). One editor replied to a correspondent protesting at the non-delivery of copies of the newspaper in particularly fervid terms, showing a certain degree of common cause with his readers:

> We have to inform our Correspondent that the English Post-office at St. Martin's-le-Grand has, we fear, recommenced Grahaming letters and newspapers …we will raise a hornet's nest about Mr Rowland Hill's head, the Postmaster-General's and the Government, which they little contemplate-Ed (*The Daily Telegraph,* 2 August 1855).

Other readers protested against the danger, whether experienced or merely feared, of goods going missing in transit. 'Saint Mungo', writing to *The Daily Telegraph*, applauded the paper's editorial line on increasing the pay of Post Office clerks:

> If another argument was needed it is supplied in the frequent convictions for theft of letters containing coin, &c- a manifest proof that the "pay" does not place the men above temptation- and which ought to convince the government of the impolicy of underpaying (them) (9 August 1861).

An 'Ex-auxilliary sorter', meanwhile, added fuel to the fire by explaining the Post Office 'joke' of damaging packages containing wedding cake slices, commonly sent to extended kin and friends after weddings, in order to surreptitiously consume the contents, with:

> two or three sorters each doing a little damage in turn to a box, until … a hole is made in the box sufficient for the extraction of the greater part of the cake, which is passed along the line of sorters and eaten with great relish … My object in writing is to show that there are many officials at the G.P.O. who cannot possibly be ignorant of this state of things, which has been going on for years (*Daily Mail*, 10 December 1896).

Pity for the recipient of such an abused cake, passed through numerous unsanitary hands, was mixed with anger at the official dereliction which made it possible. Such concerns rendered visible the affront to dignity in being obliged to invest trust in the unknown and unseen.

The Post Office as an institution for the distribution of newspapers was also under fire. E. J. Kibblewhite's broadside against Post Office censorship (see above) was by no means a unique concern. The power of the Post Office to mediate on the question of what publications qualified as newspapers was a key element in its dominance of the information spheres of nineteenth century Britain, a dominance further secured by its control of telegraphy later in the century. A. G. Jeans, for example, disputed statements from the Postmaster-General (*The Times* 19 March, 1895; 9 April, 1895) to the effect that cheaper rates for press telegrams were a burden on the Post Office, pointing to the likelihood that such telegrams were taking up telegraphy 'space' at times when the service was least in use (overnight) and costs were additionally offset by revenues to the Post Office from letters responding to newspaper advertisements. In so doing Jeans acknowledged the extent to which the expanding press and the Post Office were entwined as public institutions in ways increasingly uncomfortable to both parties.

Other letter writers equally expressed concern at the personal and business implications of the Post Office being late with the delivery of newspapers. For many these anxieties were

prompted by the increasing centrality of timely 'news' to trade. For others the offence was more in the seeming partisanship of the Post Office. Thus 'A country parson' requires

> to know why the Post Office should delay the transmission of newspapers while it is so wonderfully punctual in the delivery of the daily plague of prospectuses, stockbrokers' circulars, pamphlets, and all kinds of advertisements? (*The Times*, 15 January 1873)

Here the postal service is an intrusion into the domestic sphere, obliging the Victorian householder to accept an uncomfortable intimacy with 'trade'.

Others saw in the Post Office the possibility of moralising the populace. Walter James for example, writes of Post Office Savings Banks in 1878:

> It is a great pity that these useful institutions should not be open at all hours, and particularly on Friday nights, when they might intercept the working man on his way to the publichouse (sic.) They should be marked by some conspicuous sign so as to speak eloquently to his conscience- Here is the path, the narrow path of thrift and safety (*The Times*, 16 November 1878)

The transformation of the Post Office thus presented a set of challenges to citizens and their self-conceptions. These raised questions around the directedness of accountability between the new 'always on' citizen and an increasingly involved, if also increasingly removed, 'central' state; traditional statuses and their role in a new socio-technical system; the basis on which rights to privacy were founded; the nature and extent of 'abstract' trust; and the role of the Post Office in the dissemination of news and political opinion. All these issues were foregrounded by the reform and expansion of Post Office services.

It is clear that just as it is reasonable to argue that 'the state actively helps make the spheres of the public and the private in the first place' (Joyce, 2013: 5), so too did the press and its correspondents. Citizens wrote to the newspapers here on issues of 'merely' personal concern, but they were ones directly connected to a wider sense of 'public engagement' through their critique of such a visible public institution. Of course, such a shaping of the public/private spheres is a profoundly political act. As Verstraeten points out

> Defining the 'public' and 'private' spheres has always been one of the most efficient political-ideological classifications to legitimize or delegitimize certain problematic issues. The old women's liberation slogan 'personal affairs are also political' pithily illustrates this constantly shifting field of tension of inclusion and exclusion (Verstraeten, 1996: 351).

In universalising from their own experience, and using their private lives as a basis for a critique of public institutions, the correspondents were drawing on a different sense of publicness and public issues, one in which the personal is *already* political. Publicness can then be read not only as legibility (presence of an issue), but also as the ways in which the personal is *made* political. It is not the case that the mundane and everyday pollute the public sphere as strictly Habermassian accounts might suggest, but rather that these activities create the 'common ground' of 'common interest' to begin with. In this process, as

the above discussion has demonstrated, the validation that readers receive through having their letters published—and interactions subsequent on these—plays a key role in the creation of empowered citizens.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the ways in which formal features of letters to the editor in nineteenth century society opened up specific modes of public engagement, allowing people to understand themselves as citizens, and positioning the press as an alternate sphere of power. I have attempted to look at the case of nineteenth century media through the lens of accounts of citizen engagement, which are more open to the broader contexts in which people exercise 'voice' in mediated societies. As Edwards argues, '(v)oice emerges in the mediapolis as simultaneous possibilities of connection and separation between people and organisations who wish to act politically by engaging as citizens in mediated spaces of appearance' (2018: 320). Voice presumes a relation between the speaker and their audience which is reciprocal and collective in nature. I have here argued that to a degree, constrained and limited as it may be, the nineteenth century press enabled this sense of collectivity. By taking a place on a national media stage, Victorian letter writers saw themselves reflected as citizens, and saw their own lives and life experiences as political and national questions.

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