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[this a postprint version of a short piece in the *Journal of Victorian Culture* that honours the contribution of Laurel Brake to the study of nineteenth-century print culture. It is available OA here: <https://academic.oup.com/jvc/article/26/3/355/6264927> Please cite the published version]

## 12. 'A revolution in the making': Theory, Practice, Print Culture

James Mussell

In her 'On Print Culture: The State We're In', published in this journal in 2001, Laurel surveyed the field as it was about to be transformed by the digital resources then in development. At this point microfilm was still the most common way nineteenth-century periodicals were disseminated beyond those institutions that held hard copy, but there were digital versions of bibliographical tools such as the *Wellesley Index* and *Waterloo Directory*, both of which were available on CD ROM. Sensing what was coming – the *Times Digital Archive* would appear the following year – Laurel argued that access first to 'digital headnotes and indexes of titles', then 'digitally searchable full texts of journals, available online in libraries and through libraries at home', seemed like 'a revolution in the making'.<sup>1</sup>

Yet for Laurel it was not just digitization that heralded the revolution. There had been two historical developments, she argued, 'one primarily epistemological and the other technological' (p. 125). While innovations in digital technology would radically redefine the terms of access to nineteenth-century print, a theoretical reinterpretation of this material was already underway. Approaches deriving from structuralism, she suggested, combined with a Bakhtinian approach to popular culture, challenged the marginalization of newspapers and periodicals by challenging the disciplines that made such material marginal. Poststructural notions of text, for instance, enabled a broader approach to culture that did not rely on traditionally privileged forms such as the book. For Laurel, in particular, it also usefully weakened the persistent ideological barrier that kept newspaper journalism at arm's length from writing more readily incorporated into literary studies. It was not enough to make space for periodicals if such space was justified by the status of contributors or the perceived literary value of their contents. If 'print culture' was to exist as a field it had to encompass newspapers, with all their associations with ephemerality, the commercial, and the popular. And it had to encompass all that other unfathomably inky material besides.

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<sup>1</sup> Laurel Brake, 'On Print Culture: The State We're In', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 6.1 (2001), 125–36 (p. 126).

In her formulation, Laurel presented first the epistemological development then the technological, but in the paper itself she started with the technological, weaving the discussion of theory throughout. Theory is a kind of doing but doing is also a kind of thinking, and, by turning to questions of access first, Laurel foregrounded that kind of thinking that emerges from an encounter with the archive. The technological developments discussed in the essay transformed nineteenth-century material to increase access. This, alone, has been (and continues to be) transformational, as the more people who encounter this material the more things it can be. But transforming the print archive also produces new modes of thinking by first defamiliarizing print and second by granting it new affordances that change its behaviour. We do not just read Victorian print anymore, but scan and scroll, search and process, map and mine.

This is creative, constructive, bibliographic work, redefining the archive by creating new modes of encounter. I see something similar in the work of W.T. Stead, someone to whom Laurel has returned throughout her career. Stead was a theorist of the press: although best known for his two articles in the *Contemporary Review*, ‘The Future of Journalism’ and ‘Government by Journalism’ (1886), he addressed again and again the purpose of print and how it sat alongside other media technologies. Yet Stead was also an energetic experimentalist in print, punctuating serial rhythms with extras and other supplements, gathering and regathering works into series, and launching speculative publishing ventures, often entangled with the various causes he promoted. And Stead had an abiding interest in the archive, recognizing not just the value of what had been published, but that this archive could be generative in its own right.

In the ‘Programme’ for the *Review of Reviews*, Stead famously defended his new monthly by recourse to Matthew Arnold’s notion of culture. Alive to the charge that he was profiting from content published elsewhere, Stead justified it as a means of making ‘the best thoughts of the best writers in our periodicals universally accessible.’<sup>2</sup> This not only meant aggregating material from a wide range of sources and then circulating it in an affordable and attractive form, but also organizing this material, ensuring that readers could both keep up with it as published and look it up later. Stead’s argument was that by preserving the ‘best’ he could assist the rest to be forgotten, yet his practice was nothing like this. While the *Review of Reviews* did reprint choice selections from the periodical press, it also produced monthly indexes, annual indexes, a spiritualist quarterly, and, as supplements, books, often gathered in

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<sup>2</sup> [W.T. Stead], ‘Programme’, *Review of Reviews*, 1 (1891), 14 (p. 14).

series. Stead might have claimed to be motivated by ‘the merits and demerits of the articles’, but his frantic energy and relentlessly bibliographic imagination reconceived print culture in ways that went far beyond Arnoldian notions of ‘the best.’

Stead put into play his own combination of theory and practice, the print objects he created opening up and remediating the wider world of print. His various bibliographic efforts, from reprints and reprinting to indexes and indexing, from mapping the periodical archive to archiving the dead, rethought print culture and what it might do. In her article, Laurel claimed she wanted to ‘maximize links and overlaps among the periodical, newspaper and book’ that she believed ‘characteristic of the period’ and went on to give a tantalizing and provocative list of issues that might now be addressed (and which is too long to reproduce here). For me, that list represents what can be gained by stepping beyond what Laurel describes as ‘vertical studies of individual titles and journalists’ (135) and looking instead at the connections between them. Verticality is important, but such studies risk reifying the apparent autonomy of individual titles and people; horizontality, however, provides different vantage points from which different objects of study appear. As Laurel put it in a later article, ‘networking can be understood as part of *the structure* of journalism’ and bibliographical work reveals other forms of association.<sup>3</sup> Laurel is one of our most important thinkers of the nineteenth-century press, but she is also a doer. Back then, in 2001, Laurel saw clearly how the field was being changed. With the *Nineteenth-Century Serials Edition* (2008) and the *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism* (2009), she jumped right in to change it.

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<sup>3</sup> Laurel Brake, “‘Time’s Turbulence’: Mapping Journalism Networks’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 44.2 (2011), 115–27 (p. 117).