**The Newsmongers: A History of Tabloid Journalism,** by Terry Kirby, London, Reaktion Books, 2024, 392 pp., £20 (hardback) ISBN-13: 9781789149418.

How should we write the history of tabloid journalism? What exactly is the subject of such a history, and where are the key sources? These are complex questions, but there are three main approaches that scholars can take. The first is to focus on the people who manage, produce and write for the leading newspapers - the press barons, the intrepid editors, the star reporters - and tell a story of how they developed and adapted the tabloid format. The second is to examine the content of the papers themselves, exploring the spectacular miscellany of news reports, features, interviews, illustrations, letters, consumer advice, puzzles, cartoons and advertisements. The third is to try to understand how newspapers were read and received by their readers (and, indeed, by those who weren’t readers but who nevertheless expressed their opinions) and to assess the extent to which journalism shaped popular attitudes or created a social and cultural impact. Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses, and poses different challenges. To what extent can we get beyond the self-promotion of editors and proprietors to determine how policies were crafted and decision-making really worked? How do we meaningfully analyse the hundreds of pages produced by each title week in, week out, over decades, and draw conclusions about different types of coverage? Conversely, how do we deal with the scarcity of information about reception, and not over-interpret the interesting, but opaque, statistics about the rise and fall of circulation? There are no easy answers here, and works that attempt to combine elements of all three approaches see these difficulties multiply. But if we don’t at least try to appreciate these different aspects of the tabloid’s journey from printing press to breakfast table, or from the correspondent’s scribbling of their report to readers arguing about it later, we are not going to grasp all the dimensions of how newspapers shaped, informed and influenced the societies they served.

Terry Kirby’s *The Newsmongers* demonstrates both the advantages and pitfalls of sticking largely to one approach. As the title suggests, Kirby’s history focuses firmly on the creators and purveyors of news, and is a relatively traditional narrative of how ‘great men’ (and occasionally ‘great women’) have developed, refined and exploited the tabloid approach. ‘Tabloid’ is, of course, a slippery term. Kirby sensibly defines it as ‘a state of mind and a method of practice’ (13) which attempts to provide news in a concise and compressed form using simple language and visual appeal, and is ‘attuned to the realities of everyday life for ordinary people’ (12). As is conventional, he reaches back to early forms of print culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (ballads, pamphlets, newssheets) to find prototypes of this form of journalism, before picking up the story in more detail from the industrialisation of the press in the second half of the nineteenth century. Kirby devotes most of his attention to British ‘newsmongers’, but there are occasional diversions to the United States - taking in proprietors such as John and James Gordon Bennett, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst - when their examples are particularly influential. But this is a somewhat lopsided history. The author is far more expansive about recent decades, and we’re not much more than a third of the way through the narrative when we reach the rise of Rupert Murdoch’s *Sun* in the 1970s. The heart of this history is in the last fifty years.

The virtue of sticking mainly to the production side of tabloid journalism is that it enables the unfolding of a clear and engaging narrative, full of big personalities and eye-catching anecdotes. Kirby was a journalist himself for many years and writes crisply and with an eye for the telling detail. For those relatively new to the history of British journalism, there is much to be learned here, and the author is generally sure-footed in recounting the history of the leading popular papers. He concentrates mainly on the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Mirror* and the *Sun*, with other papers entering the frame as required, and there is a keen sense of where the innovation was at particular moments. It should be said, too, that this is a book aimed at a wider audience, rather than a strictly academic work, and there is no pretence that it is built on rigorous archival research. But this inevitably means that for those with some knowledge of the field, the material, particularly in the first half, is largely familiar. The author makes little effort to produce a distinctive analysis - indeed, the overall argument is not entirely clear, a problem compounded by the fact that the Conclusion offers a series of unconnected examples and quotations rather than an accessible rehearsal of the author’s thoughts.

The implicit argument seems to be that the ongoing search for profit in a highly competitive environment leads to a gradual lowering of standards and a cutting of corners. This is hardly an original interpretation, although it becomes fresher in relation to the contemporary period where Kirby writes thoughtfully about the phone-hacking scandal, the Leveson Report and the tremendous pressures wrought by social media. In the last decade or so, he notes, a ‘new rule’ has emerged: ‘any social media post about anything, anywhere, by anyone that attracted either disparaging or enthusiastic comments or both was probably worthy of a story’ (p.307). Tabloid journalism became less and less about the creation of new content and more and more the recycling of existing material from press releases or the internet. But across the book as a whole, the argument is hard to assess without greater consideration of the actual content, attention to how readers consumed newspaper, or, indeed, knowledge of the broader media environment. Editors and proprietors across the period talked about their papers being bright, punchy and relevant; critics decried them as crude, sensational and inflammatory. How can we assess these terms without more scrutiny of the text and image, or trying to uncover how readers responded? It is striking, for example, how unsensational the *Daily Mail* of 1896 was, despite all the derogatory comments of the cultural elites. Or, to take another example, there were times in the mid-twentieth century when the *Daily Mirror* was genuinely pushing boundaries and producing journalism that was innovative and distinctive; at the same time, on certain issues (race, gender, sexuality) it could still be lazy and stereotypical. Well before the rise of the internet and social media, the popularisation of television fundamentally changed how tabloids related to their readers – that is the essential context for the success of the *Sun* in the 1970s. Interpreting all of this requires a wide-ranging approach which looks beyond the view from the editorial office.

Kirby’s book is an accessible and witty addition to the literature on tabloid journalism, and will be particularly valuable for anyone who wants to contextualise very recent developments in a broader timeframe. There remains, however, plenty of important work for scholars of the British popular press to do.

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