The 19th Century British Library Newspapers website

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The *19th Century British Library Newspapers* [2] digital archive provides a full run of 48 British newspapers from the 19th century from 1800 to 1900. It was funded by a grant of £2m from the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) from April 2004 to make up to two million pages of the British Library's newspaper holdings available digitally as a fully searchable database for access by the UK higher education and further education communities, its primary audience. It became available from early 2008 and is commercially distributed by Gale Cengage.

A key aspect of the project's construction was an academic user panel which was called upon to assist in the selection of newspapers and to advise on the usability of the website design. The preliminary list of titles included at least 160 newspapers, split into London national dailies and weeklies; English regional dailies and weeklies; and Home Countries' newspapers (Scottish national, Scottish regional, Welsh, Irish and Northern Irish). Priority for inclusion was given to newspapers that helped lead particular political or social movements, organized in specialist sub-clusters such as Reform, Chartism, and Home Rule. Cheap papers aimed at the working classes are also present in the collection.

To further refine the criteria for selection, an online questionnaire was circulated to stakeholders and potential users during February and March 2005. This confirmed the desire for the broadest possible UK coverage within the necessary restrictions of the budget. The initial list was then pruned into four coherent strands ensuring that titles selected were geographically and politically as representative as possible and also could lay claim to wide circulation or a wide political influence, particularly in their editorials. Included were several national titles such as *Reynolds's Weekly Newspaper, The Morning Chronicle,* some specialist interest titles, such as *The Era* and *The Examiner*, as well as a number of Reform and Chartist papers. To capture something of the linguistic variety of the newspaper press across the century there are also three Welsh language titles, two Irish, three Scottish, and two Welsh general papers. The final 48 titles selected include 17 national and 29 regional newspapers, including two titles which are mainly illustrated: *Illustrated Police News* and *The Graphic*. Despite this admirable attempt at inclusivity, it could easily be demonstrated that the liberal and radical press is better represented than the conservative press, yet it is hard to fault the process of this necessarily finite selection given the acknowledged demands and potential needs expressed by such a large group of stakeholders and potential users of the archive. A total of 195 people replied and of these, the majority consisted of librarians and lecturers working mainly in universities and further education colleges, with a spread of researchers, students, managers, and teachers. 13 percent of the replies came from the US.

The final selection of newspapers selected by the British Library in consultation with the range of academic

experts is designed to provide a cross-section which represents the development of the newspaper as an important contributor to social and political life in 19th-century Britain. The selection of newspapers from the 19th century, which are no longer in production, avoids both issues of copyright as well as potential areas of duplication with contemporary newspapers which are making their own historical holdings more accessible to online searching.

This is a timely production in several ways from both historiographical and technological perspectives. From a scholarly point of view it will be used to enhance the emerging work on 19th-century newspaper history published in journals such as *Media History* and the *Journal of British Studies* as well as in recent publications like Wiener and Hampton (1) and Brake and Demoor.(2) The resource will help to reaffirm the centrality of newspaper content and production in the shaping of the dominant discourses of 19th-century Britain (3) and it will enable research projects to be undertaken with an economy of scale and efficiency not possible when limited to the confines of physical archives. It will also greatly enhance the specific project of Journalism Studies, which has been elevated rapidly and recently to sub-panel status at the prestigious ICA conference in recognition of the fertility of this emergent field of study as expressed in journals such as *Journalism Studies, Journalism Practice* and *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism*. The availability of high-quality text and image within the resource will enhance further research into the relationship between the language of representation within 19th-century newspapers and popular visual culture. Technologically, it will complement pioneering work on the digitization of 19th-century periodicals led by Brake on the Nineteenth Century Serials Edition (NCSE) digital project as well as the more extensive Nineteenth Century Periodicals and Burney Catalogue digital archives available commercially. It will also assist in the development of historical approaches to the changing patterns of newspaper language championed by scholars such as Jucker in his *Journal of Historical Pragmatics*. Looking across the field to newspapers still in production and which have made digital archives available commercially, the British Library archive will enable more longitudinal comparison with, for instance, the *Daily Mirror*, *Guardian/Observer* and *Times* as well as comparisons with the Early American Newspapers online archive which is now commercially available. It is, of course, regrettable at present that there is no possible way for researchers to make the most of this plethora of online material for fully integrated research. Apart from the free availability of the archive under discussion, many other digital archives which could potentially complement it so productively are prohibitively costly and only some serious negotiation between publishers and university libraries can ensure this research potential is fulfilled by extending affordable access beyond a wealthy elite.

The web site provides a well-signposted Topic Guide to allow context for accessing the material including brief essays and biographical information for non-specialists in the field. This material is well-designed and lucidly presented and includes newspaper history, people (from William Cobbett to George Reynolds) and historical context (from urban growth to the importance of the British Empire). There are some useful cross-references between the general histories and the practices of specific journalists and newspapers such as Stead and Mayhew. These could be improved with more hypertext linkage, for instance to other BL material, for those requiring more than a cursory overview. The bibliography, for instance, is a fair, generalist tool but is missing some essential, recent material. One wonders whether the site is constantly being updated with relevant material or whether the process of intervention by its producers or even users is now at an end. De Nie (4) , Potter (5), Hampton (6) even Thompson (7) with his classic on the 19th-century radical press and its formative influence on class consciousness could all be included and summarized in their findings on the context and history of newspapers of the 19th century.

Individual issues by month, date and year can easily be accessed through the Browse by Publication function. For additional background on a specific newspaper there are useful headnotes which provide the essential details about the publication dates, changes of name, editorial contributors and key features of each of the publications. Again, although useful, this could be made more practical as a research tool, even for non-specialists, by providing cross-links to other parts of the archive or even beyond the archive itself to further online material.

The archive has successfully scanned the entire microfilmed content to provide effective article zoning and

page extraction; OCR of the page images assists enormously in the important business of finding what a story or an advertisement looked like on the page and for exploring the essential constructedness of newspaper discourse.(8) The quality and consistency of the material available is enhanced due to the fact that the majority of pages have been digitized from new microfilm (90% of all pages copied). An in-house quality assurance team based at the British Library prepared and repaired the selected volumes and filtered out duplicates and variants as well as identifying missing pages and issues at the start of the project. Newspaper images can be magnified for easier reading or reduced for on screen navigation. Articles can be saved and printed, created as persistent links and emailed to others. When trying to print entire newspaper pages, they need to be tiled to make them legible, given the differing paper size between 19th-century newsprint and contemporary common office paper sizes.

Basic Searches can be performed from the entry page of the database. The Advanced Search facility can be used to refine a search using keyword, date range or various metadata fields, either across the entire database of 48 titles or limited to selected publications. A clearly laid out Help section provides more detailed information about searching.

Newspapers are indexed by title, date, issue and location. A set of rules has been devised for the segmentation of pages and the creation of articles. The articles are then categorized into newspaper 'sections' for more detailed searching. These sections help both at the search level, where a section may be specified to limit your results, and in the search results list, where articles are divided by section. An article can be bookmarked (or a page of search results) by using the Bookmark icon in the top menu bar. In addition, while viewing an article or page, you may email yourself or others the citation information for the article(s). As you use the Mark feature, you may also email yourself the list of Marked Items for future reference.

A further enhancement of the search technology is the fuzzy logic (or fuzzy searching) which allows the search process to find 'near misses' to the term being searched. This is a particularly valuable feature within a database such as *19th Century British Library Newspapers* in that it allows a user to locate a word or words within documents despite imperfect matches in spelling between the searched term and document content. This is a common occurrence in 19th-century documents due to spelling variants. Three levels of fuzzy searching are offered so that the user may fine-tune a search depending on how closely he/she wants to match term(s): Low, Medium, and High. The Low setting will expand the full-text search results to include matches very near to the chosen term(s), while the High setting expands the results to include much more broad matches.

Overall, this is a wonderfully rich resource which has all the benefits of a well-funded, exhaustively researched project designed with the views of potential users well to the fore. The process of academic consultation has produced a selection of material which is certainly of enormous value for those wishing to better understand the language, layout and political contexts of the 19th-century newspaper across the British Isles. The website design complements its ambition to make the resource available to a wide range of scholars from newspaper specialists to historians and sociologists and from postgraduate researchers to teachers at Further Education institutions. This useability is particularly noticeable in the construction of the search and save tools which, with time, will surely enable a hitherto disparate and unconnected community of scholars to be better able to navigate, archive and communicate their material with a greater sense of shared purpose.

Notes

1. *Anglo-American Media Interactions 1850–2000,* ed. J. Wiener and M. Hampton (Basingstoke, 2007). Back to (1)
2. L. Brake and M. Demoor, *A Dictionary of Nineteenth Century Journalism* (Chicago, 2009). Back to (2)
3. L. Brown, *Victorian News and Newspapers* (Oxford, 1985). Back to (3)
4. M. De Nie, *The Eternal Paddy: Irish identity and the British Press 1798–1882* (Madison, 2004). Back

to (4)

5. S. J. Potter, *News and the British World: the Emergence of an Imperial Press 1876–1922* (Oxford, 2003). Back to (5)
6. M. Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain 1850–1950* (Urbana and Chicago, 2004). Back to (6)
7. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963). Back to (7)
8. Terdiman, R. *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: the Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth Century France* (Ithaca, NY, 1985). Back to (8)

Other reviews:

[3]

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