

# Press barons of the 20th century media essay



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Studying the history of communication incorporates a review of how media and media form have developed over the years as well as their impact in the socio-political spheres of the contemporary society. In this paper, the discussion shall exclusively focus on the history of the press barons in the 20th Century. The paper is structured in progressively discursive sections where the discussion is elevated in a sequential manner towards a conclusion. To begin with, the paper will define the term press barons and introduce the prominent press barons of 20th century. The second section will then detail the social and political impacts of the press barons with numerous examples as provided by relevant literature. The third section of the paper will review the press barons of the 20th century and their influence of contemporary media. The section will allow for opinionated hypotheses backed by credible research evidence, thus terminating with a conclusion on the issues raised throughout the paper.

## **Press Barons of the 20th Century**

In typical use, the term press baron denotes a media proprietor, during the time when the media referred exclusively to the printed press. A press baron was any person who controlled, either by virtue of personal ownership or by having a dominant share portfolio in the mass media company. In other contexts, media proprietors have been called media tycoons and media moguls (Coleridge 1993, pp. 18 - 53). Media proprietors only became a significant group of celebrities at the close of the 19th century consequent to the launch development of newspapers as mass circulating publications (Coleridge 1993, pp. 18 - 53).

During this era, the most notable press owners and or controllers included, Lord Rothermere, Lord Northcliffe and Lord Beaverbrook all from and operating in the UK, while William Randolph Hearst stood as the pioneer press baron in the US (Coleridge 1993, pp. 18 - 53). At the beginning of the 20th Century, the mass media platforms grew to include radio and television as well as book publishing houses and film studios (Coleridge 1993, pp. 18 - 53). Consequently, the proprietors of these new media became media barons and not just press barons as they had been referred to when newspapers was all the mass medium available (Coleridge 1993, pp. 18 - 53).

For the purposes of this paper, the term press baron shall refer to the pioneer media proprietors who owned and or controlled mainly newspaper publications in the 20th century. In this age, the press barons of repute with the ownership and control of a series of newspapers, and later several radio and TV networks, have included Rupert Murdoch (News Corporation), Silvio Berlusconi, Robert Maxwell, Axel Springer, Ted Turner, Conrad Black and Bill Bresnan (Bagdikian 1999, pp. 148-154). To this list, one can add Samir Jain add Vineet Jain the proprietors of The Times Group, Serge Dassault of the Dassault Group, Richard Desmond of Northern, Shell and Express Newspapers, Michael Eisner the chairman of Walt Disney Company, Barry Diller the CEO of InterActiveCorp and Ted Turner, of AOL Time Warner (Bagdikian 1999, pp. 148-154).

## **The Social and Political Impacts of the Press Barons of the 20th Century**

The press barons bore a power that had never been given to any other group of people besides political and religious leaders (Bagdikian 1999, pp. 148-

154). The newspapers cultivated a following and the ability to influence popular opinion (Bagdikian 1999, pp. 148-154). The fact that leaders in the society depended on the press to reach to the masses meant that those who had a considerable control over the press acquired a power that seemed even superior to that of political and religious leaders (Bagdikian 1999, pp. 148-154).

According to Goodlad (2003), the mass media gained phenomenal importance, popularity and impact during the 20th Century to an extent that the society's mode of life was governed by what the press dictated. Goodlad (2003) points out that the so called 'late Victorian period' saw the press gain an enormous expansion stimulated by the perpetually improving technology, as well as the elimination of the stamp taxes and paper duties imposed on the price. Consequently, the cover price of most newspapers became available to the common populace. London newspapers were courted, feared and used by politicians from all parties as a tool to gain popularity or to attack rivals (Bingham, 2010).

This trend continued to the late Victorian age and even during the Edwardian period. Newspapers had a perceptible partisan attachment and loyalty to a particular political party, most being biased towards either of the two dominant parties Liberals and Conservatives (Koss 1990, pp. 67 - 79). Goodlad (2003) reports of a German loyalty who visited London in 1904 and opined that 'the chief weapon of the various Parties is the Press'. According to Goodlad (2003), it is not possible to gauge in precisely terms, to what extent the readers of these newspapers shared the social and political prejudices the newspapers ascribed to.

What can be used as an indicator of the power of the press in its early days is how other forms of mass communication such as posters, church pamphlets and loud announcements in meeting places, declined in circulation as the press gained popularity (Boyce 1987, pp. 56 – 87). Another indicator of the power that the press barons were given by the society was by the level of effort most political leaders put in cultivating close relations and even patronage with the editors of local newspapers (Bingham, 2010). A good example of such leaders includes the Liberals Grey and Asquith who are documented to have cultivated close association with J. Spender, then an influential Westminster Gazette editor (1896 and 1921) (Bingham, 2010).

The press became increasingly powerful after 1910 to an extent that even politicians sought to gain direct control and ownership of the newspapers as a strategy to gain political mileage (Bingham, 2010). Other politicians had their careers made, ruined or marred by press coverage. Stanley Baldwin, the embattled British Prime Minister, once publicly accused all of the London press of biased political coverage and personalized political agendas.

According to Baldwin, the press “ exercised the prerogative of the harlot through the ages: power without responsibility” (Seymour-Ure 2008; pp. 77 – 84; Bingham, 2010; Curran and Seaton 2009; pp. 44 – 75).

Lord Northcliffe’s The Times is said to have played a very important role in triggering Asquith’s resignation as Prime Minister of Britain in 1916, after a Cabinet crisis (Bingham, 2010). The same has been noted with the American press in the last century, most notably Rupert Murdoch of the News Corporation, who was repeatedly accused of supporting particular politicians and abusing his ownership and control of the media to popularize such

politicians as Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and John Howard (Bingham, 2010; Curran and Seaton 2009; pp. 44 – 75).

In 1918 for instance, Lloyd George unsuccessfully marshalled a take-over bid for the Liberal Daily Chronicle, followed by another unsuccessful ownership bid for The Times newspaper in 1922 (Bingham, 2010). The Labour Party in collaboration with the trade union movement founded the Daily Herald in 1912 (Bingham, 2010). By 1915, newspapers had become a powerful social and political tool for mass control to an extent that almost every party and or politician desired to own a piece of the industry (Bingham, 2010). However, in the 1920's, printing costs and advertising revenue competition made it relatively unrealistic for political parties to run newspapers directly. What resulted was a series of takeovers and buyouts favouring the emergence and growth of powerful newspaper chains owned and controlled by a few powerful individuals (Bagdikian 1999, pp. 148-154). Thus emerged the press barons most notably Lord Northcliffe who founded the Daily Mail and bought The Times between 1907 and 1922 (Curran, Aelst and Aalberg 2010, pp. 255-271).

A huge number of the literature on press barons usually explores ways in which these media proprietors used their positions vindictively to further their political agendas (Boyce 1987, pp. 56 – 87). The literature concurs that, based on validated research, all the press barons especially those in Britain exercised a great deal of personal control over what was published in their newspapers (Curran, Aelst and Aalberg 2010, pp. 255-271). This control enabled them to wage and propel political campaigns that they personally subscribed to. Geoffrey Dawson, who was the chief editor at The Times

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between 1912 and 1919 as well as between 1923 and 1941, is documented for having close association with most of the powerful Neville Chamberlain government officials (Bingham, 2010). Consequently, The Times was a staunch supporter for the policies seeking to appease Nazi Germany, mainly proposed by the Neville Chamberlain government. This was against the stance taken by pro-Conservative newspapers like the Daily Telegraph (Bingham, 2010).

It is notable that the prominent press barons of post-1945 involved themselves only to a minimal extent with party politics as compared to their pre-war peers (Bingham, 2010). The press had acquired the commercial success and potential that was more lucrative than political influence (Bingham, 2010). Such barons as Roy Thomson, owner of The Sunday Times since 1959 as well as The Times since 1967, had a pure commercial motive. In this age, newspapers gained a less partisan social role and refrained acquiring an editorial bias or loyalty to any party (Bingham, 2010).

Besides the political influence, press barons were also very influential on the social front (Boyce 1987, pp. 56 - 87). The newspapers were a source of entertainment and in most cases determined what was accepted as entertainment and what was rejected. If a play or book was positively featured by the press, it garnered huge popularity (Coleridge 1993, pp. 68 - 97). Entertainment was largely popularized using the press to an extent that concerns were expressed on how the press was handling their double role of entertaining and informing (Coleridge 1993, pp. 68 - 97; Croteau and Hoynes 2006, pp. 84 - 93). This concerns triggered several market surveys, the most significance one being the 1938 Report on the British Press conducted by the <https://assignbuster.com/press-barons-of-the-20th-century-media-essay/>

Political and Economic Planning policy organisation (Bingham, 2010). The report expressed concerns that the press had acquired a dangerous trend where entertainment stopped being ancillary to the news and supersede or absorbed it (Bingham, 2010).

Lord Rothermere and Beaverbrook premised most of their social campaigns on a belief that their popular newspapers could mobilize the power of their readers in challenging any social order or tradition (Lloyd 2004, pp. 28 - 94). This belief was partly correct in that people were only informed by the newspapers at that time, as the only source of news available to the masses (Bagdikian 1999, pp. 148-154). By 1930's, over 70% of the British and US population read a daily newspaper regularly and almost every family accessed a Sunday paper (Bingham, 2010). As Badsey (2010) posts, Lord Northcliffe's newspapers constituted half the all newspapers sold in London in 1914. Badsey (2010) opines that it was Northcliffe's success that ultimately ushered the press baron's era in Britain. Northcliffe would be joined later in this league of nobles by his brother Rothermere and Canadian Lord Beaverbrook (Daily Express owner). According to Badsey (2010), almost every adult in Britain accessed a national and or local newspaper on a daily basis, including those in tiny country villages where pages of local newspaper were frequently pinned on public notice boards.

## **Press Barons of the 20th Century and their Influence of Contemporary Media**

I believe that the press barons of the last century have shaped the way contemporary media is owned and operated in several ways. To begin with, the press barons exercised great influence and control on what was



published to an extent that their newspapers' editorial policy became their personal campaigns. As Bingham (2010) notes, the British press at the age of press barons was accused repeatedly of being irresponsible and untrustworthy. They were accused of undermining and sidetracking the democratic process as well as poisoning the political debate of the country based on the political inclinations of their owners (Bingham, 2010). The 1921 press campaign that opposed government expenditure is a good example of initiatives exercised their clout to shape political and social issues. In this campaign, Lord Northcliffe and Lord Rothermere successfully backed candidates who supported reduction of government waste in three British by-elections, ultimately leading to a drastic cut in public spending in 1922 (Curran, Aelst and Aalberg 2010, pp. 255-271).

This trend is still evident, although the level of control that media proprietors exercise today is covert and subtle. Further, the common trend of the British and US media inciting hostility and apathy against immigrants in this countries as well as their ethnic minorities (which is only now declining) originates from this age when the press barons used their newspapers to campaign for what they felt was the appropriate patriotism (Bingham, 2010). Much of the ethnic hatred and acrimony witnessed at the close of the last century and the beginning years of this century originate from the traditions established by the press barons.

As Bingham (2010) postulates, the trend of seeking popularity with the masses by brazening entertainment stories and presenting them as news or as more important than the news is what has nurtured the coarsening trends of public life witnessed today. Just like in the interwar period when celebrity

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news and personality profiles became an important part of the press coverage, modern media has grown to promote the intrusive and sleazy celebrity culture as more important to the informative content that such media could disseminate (Bingham, 2010). On this count, I concur with Bingham (2010) in noting that the contemporary trends where the media narrows public debate to a particular subject is a culmination of historical tendencies. Promoting human interest and celebrity stories dominantly above informative content, for instance, is a trend that has been inherited over the decades from the press barons who wanted to create popular readership.

I believe that contemporary media determines who is elected as a leader in many nations of the world. The media endears some candidates to the electorate while depicting other candidates as villains. This tradition is not unique to contemporary media though. The largest basis of the press barons' social and political power was based on ignorance and monopoly. Badsey (2010) opines that the lack of opinion polls or any other way of measuring public opinion, made politicians pay exaggerated respect to and fear of popular newspapers and newspaper owners.

Nonetheless, press barons had a considerable power adequate to make a non-entity individual the prime minister of Britain. David Lloyd George for instance, belonged to this breed of so-called 'populist politicians' who solely depended on the press to access power. He thus closely associated himself with the press barons in London as well as their editors, an effort that would ultimately pay off in his capturing of the Prime Minister post in 1916. Recent leaders whose popularity was linked to media patronage include President

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George Bush (US), Prime Minister Tony Blair (UK), President Silvio Berlusconi (Italy) among others.

In *Fleet Street, Press Barons and Politics*, Collin Brooks narrates a personal account as a journalist and editor in the 1930's, both at the *Financial News* and the *Sunday Dispatch* (Crowson 1999, pp. 11 - 64). In his rise through the ladders to a chief editor, Brooks narrates of an intimate friendship and contact with Lord Rothermere, thus providing a unique and even rare insight into the press baron's mentality and operations (Crowson 1999, pp. 11 - 64). What is most instrumental for the purposes of this paper is Brook's testimony of how the press baron orchestrated his perspective upon the right-wing Conservatism during the reign of Chamberlain and Baldwin using the press outlets he owned (Crowson 1999, pp. 11 - 64). Such tactics as covering what was supportive to the media owners personal allegiances and then avoiding mentioning whatever was contrary to that allegiance, are still being used by many media owners today.

The history of the press barons also points out a very important social role that they played that of social advocacy (Boyce 1987, pp. 56 - 87).

Whenever the press barons supported a particular cause, they were able to rally public and government support in a unique way (Boyce 1987, pp. 56 - 87). Using this ability, the press barons encouraged civic contributions and improvements, promoted agricultural and business interests, inspired encourage public safety policies and city planning initiatives, an encouraged economic growth and economic expansion among the population (Cox 2005, pp. 24 - 108). George Bannerman Dealey the founder and long-time proprietor of *Dallas Morning News*, is reputed to have is reputed to have

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helped initiate the revolution that modernized Texas beginning late 19th Century to early 20th Century (Cox 2005, pp. 24 - 94). He strongly advocated for reduced defence spending as well as for more federal investments in the state. A good example is how the Texan Morning News championed the state government and public to initiate a public education system under the leadership of Dealey (Cox 2005, pp. 68 - 108).

This trend is continuing today. Media owners and influential journalists still wield great influence in triggering social change and economic growth (Jenkins 1986, pp. 76 - 89). Their participation in charitable causes such as providing aid after a disaster usually attracts mass action. Whether it is to support girl child education in Palestine or to feed starving children in Southern Sudan, the participation of media owners and popular journalists always triggers great public support and collaboration (Curran, Aelst and Aalberg 2010, pp. 255-271).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has endeavoured to discuss the history of the press barons in the 20th Century considering the press barons influenced the social and political scenes of the era in which they were most dominant. It has emerged that the press barons of the 20th Century have had direct impacts on the contemporary trends of media ownership, control and regulation. The paper has argued that the modern trend of seeking popularity with the masses by brazening entertainment stories and presenting them as news or as more important than the news was nurtured by the press barons who wanted a return on their investment. Further, the trend of owning a series of media outlets that continues even today originates from the need to reach as many

people as possible so as to gain a political and social significance capable of influencing public debate and policy.

Conclusively therefore, this paper opines that for the press to be truly independent and objective, and for the media to play an instrumental role in socio-economic development of the societies in which they operate, there needs to be separation from their owners influence. Perhaps the answer lies in limiting the number of media outlets that an individual controls, since the more audience a particular media owner reaches, the more powerful and influential he or she becomes. Such media tycoons end up gaining a leadership role whose mandate is not constituted or endorsed by the public's right to democracy (Badsey, 2010).

A good illustration is that of the perceived importance given to the London press barons during the WW1, which ultimately saw them assigned public leadership roles they did not qualify. Lord Northcliffe for instance was appointed a Director of Propaganda in Enemy Countries as Lord Beaverbrook was appointed the head of a novel Ministry of Information (Badsey, 2010). Neither of these posts was of prime importance to public good. They were just appeasements to a few individuals who controlled the bulk of the nation's only mass media outlets (Badsey, 2010).