THE CIRCULATION OF NEWSPAPERS IN THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

BY A. ASPINALL

More than eleven and a half million newspapers were sold every day in Great Britain in 1938: approximately one paper for every four inhabitants. When Pitt became Prime Minister in 1783, very few more were sold during the whole of that year, so that there was then, on an average, only one newspaper daily for every 300 inhabitants. The reasons for this ridiculously small circulation are well known: mechanical difficulties hindering production, the backwardness of communications, the illiteracy of the population, Post Office restrictions, the hostile attitude of the governing class, and above all, heavy taxation. Less well known, however, are the expedients to which the middle class and the working classes resorted in an effort to overcome the obstacle of high prices resulting from the above-mentioned handicaps.

At no time were newspapers beyond the reach of town workers. As long ago as the 1730's, Montesquieu, whilst in England, had been struck, not only with the number and licentiousness of the London newspapers (the dailies and weeklies together being about twenty) but also with the ease with which their information reached working men. The very slaters had the newspapers brought on to the roofs of the houses on which they were working, that they might read them. Nor were newspapers beyond the reach of agricultural labourers, though there were doubtless many villages during the last decades of the eighteenth century which saw a newspaper only at irregular intervals.

It may be useful to summarize the changes in taxation, since the figures are often incorrectly given:

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<th>Year</th>
<th>Newspaper Stamp Duty</th>
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<td>1712</td>
<td>½d. (half a sheet)</td>
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<td>1757</td>
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<td>1780</td>
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These figures apply to Great Britain; the Irish were somewhat different. The pamphlet duty was merely a registration duty, payable on only one copy in each edition. The number of newspaper stamps sold in Great Britain in 1801 was 16,085,000; in 1821, 24,884,000; in 1831, 33,450,000; in 1841, 54,769,000.

1 Montesquieu, Notes sur Angleterre.
It was calculated in 1829 that, on an average, every London newspaper was read by thirty people. At that time every large, and indeed almost every small, town had its subscription reading-room, a guinea a year being the sum commonly charged for the service. Glasgow had its reading-room, where pamphlets as well as newspapers were taken in, as early as 1794, as appears from the Trial of David Downie for High Treason on 5 and 6 September of that year. Joseph Johnson, a Manchester brushmaker, one of 'Orator' Hunt's associates who were found guilty at York Assizes in March 1820 of conspiracy and unlawful assembly on the occasion of the famous meeting in St. Peter's Fields, Manchester, on 16 August 1819, kept a shop in Shude Hill which was regularly used as a working-class reading-room: the Manchester Observer was one of the papers taken in.

By 1815 reading-rooms were to be found in all parts of the country, and a large town would have several. Books and pamphlets, too, were commonly taken in. The selection of newspapers was usually made by a majority vote of the subscribers; and, as they usually liked to hear both sides of a question, Opposition as well as ministerial papers were purchased. We hear from Samuel Rogers of a reading-room in 1799 combined with a circulating library. He wrote on 23 November: 'I am much obliged to you, for the newspapers, which come regularly. Indeed, I am very luxurious in that article of news, being furnished with the three evening papers regularly after sunset from the libraries.' And The Times of 15 February 1819 contained the following advertisement:

SUBSCRIPTION READING ROOM, No. 137, Oxford Street.

W. Reynolds, at the commencement of the 2nd year of the above establishment, begs to return his most grateful thanks for the liberal patronage with which it has been honoured, and to assure his subscribers that nothing shall be wanting on his part to secure that select association, and at the same time the early possession of every new work connected with Literature, in addition to a large collection of Dictionaries, Lexicons and other books of reference, with the daily morning and evening papers.

Open to subscribers only from 9 in the morning till 10 o'clock in the evening: subscription £2 2s. per annum, from the date of the entry.

1 Westminster Review, vol. x, p. 478 (April 1829: 'Weekly Newspapers'). Since, it was said, many provincial newspapers were not read by more than seven or eight persons, every copy of a newspaper in Great Britain as a whole was read by perhaps twenty-five persons on an average. The guinea charge is mentioned in the Westminster Review article on the Provincial Newspaper Press (January 1830, p. 70).


3 'Of which James Wroe was proprietor. In the Home Office papers are many complaints by magistrates and others as to this newspaper, and the Law Officers of the Crown were frequently consulted as to seditious libels which had appeared in it.' (State Trials, New Series, vol. i, col. 183 n.)


5 Cobbett's Political Register, 22 March 1817.

6 P. W. Clayden, Early Life of Samuel Rogers, p. 389. He was writing from Exmouth.
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The taste for newspaper-reading, it was suggested in 1829, was so great at Birmingham that a subscription reading-room 'upon a very extensive scale' had recently been established in that town. An equally remarkable reading-room was attached to the Manchester bookshop started in the 1830's by John Doherty, the Radical Reformer and trade-union leader. This 'Coffee and Newsroom' was advertised in the Manchester and Salford Advertiser on 2 March 1833. It was open from six in the morning until ten at night. Ninety-six newspapers were taken in every week; they included the principal Manchester and London papers, some from Dublin, Belfast, Liverpool, Glasgow, and Leeds, most of the unstamped (and therefore illegal) ones, and even the Edinburgh Review and the Westminster Review (though not, it may be observed, the Tory Quarterly Review). Most of these papers could be bought at half price on the day preceding the publication of the succeeding number. The advertisement went on:

This establishment affords advantages never before offered to the Manchester public, combining economy, health, temperance and instruction, in having a wholesome and exhilarating beverage at a small expense, instead of the noxious and intoxicating stuff usually supplied at the alehouse and dramshop, together with the privilege of perusing the most able and popular publications of the day, whether political, literary or scientific, in a comfortable and genteel apartment, in the evening brilliantly lighted with gas.

A mass-meeting held near Burnley three months after the 'Manchester Massacre' was followed by criminal proceedings against eight Lancashire Reformers at Lancaster Assizes in April 1820. The prosecution revealed the existence at Prescot of 'Union Rooms' supported by penny-a-week subscriptions, where papers such as the Radical Manchester Observer were taken in. Dewhurst, one of the defendants, had addressed the crowd, strongly urging them to subscribe for newspapers, so that, in particular, the proceedings of Parliament might be closely watched.

In November 1819 the ministerial Courier informed its readers with great satisfaction that the South Shields reading-room was proposing to

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1 Westminster Review, January 1830, p. 74.
3 Very few English or Scottish newspapers circulated in Belfast in the 1820's, but the reading-rooms took them in. (H. of C., Accounts and Papers, 1828, vol. xv, p. 331. Evidence of Alexander Mackay, former proprietor of the Belfast Newsletter.) The Anti-Corn Law League had its own newsrooms (Trial of Feargas O'Connor and 58 other Chartists, on a charge of seditious conspiracy, 1 March 1843, p. 145).
4 These presumably belonged to the Union Clubs. Manchester had a 'Patriotic Union Society' (State Trials, N.S. vol. i, col. 1373). A meeting of Lancashire Reformers held at Oldham on 7 June 1819 recommended 'the formation of Union Societies in every town and village in the kingdom, for the purpose of acquiring and diffusing political information, and also the frequent holding of public and district meetings' (Ibid., N.S. vol. i, col. 1383). The Union Societies, or Clubs, whose object, like that of the Hampden Clubs, was to promote a radical reform of Parliament, are frequently referred to in the Parliamentary Debates for the year 1817.
5 State Trials, N.S. vol. i, col. 564.
expel The Times, presumably because of its critical attitude to the Government after 'Peterloo'. The Times declared: 'The matter is of no consequence to us whichever way decided; we can, however, inform the Courant that the proposal was negatived by 18 to 10. While the Courant exults in the proposal to lower our sale by one, by how many has he been expelled? By upwards of 5,000; we tell him boldly, and he cannot deny it.' These figures seem hardly credible.

Richard Davis, the secretary of the reading-room at Southampton, wrote to the editor of the short-lived Radical weekly, the Cap of Liberty, in August 1819, saying that a meeting of the subscribers had carried certain resolutions by 42 to 3 votes. In view of the Courant's attempts to justify the conduct of the Manchester magistrates on 16 August, that newspaper was no longer to be taken in, and four offending numbers were to be unceremoniously kicked out of the room. The members, he said, were neither Jacobins nor Radicals; they admired the venerable fabric of the Constitution as much as did the editor of the Courant. It was because they prized the rights they enjoyed under the protection of that Constitution that they were the more indignant at the shedding of so much innocent blood.

A few weeks later, another correspondent informed the Cap of Liberty of the intended establishment of a Reformers' newsroom in Manchester. He also suggested the starting of a combined newsroom and 'eating house' for Lancashire Reformers living in the country. Such papers as the Manchester Observer, the Leeds Mercury, the Liverpool Mercury, the British Gazette, the Irishman and the Scotsman should be taken in. He went on:

To the information contained in the weekly papers might be added the whole of that which is published in the various political tracts, and perhaps the country people might be indulged with a sight of the London papers, when they have been two days upon the tables of the 'Manchester Reformers' Newsroom'. A moderate-sized house, in a proper situation, furnished in a homely way with chairs, tables, gridiron, pans &c for the weavers and others from the country, or town either, to cook their herring, black pudding, bacon collop, &c would be quite sufficient. During the winter season very good fires

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1 The Times, 17 November 1819.
2 Cap of Liberty, 8 September 1819. This was the first number of that paper, published on Wednesdays, price 2d.
3 The Times declared: 'The shop of Wroe, the printer of the Manchester Observer, in that part of Market Street which has been called "Sedition Corner", is perpetually beset with poor misled creatures, whose appetite for seditious ribaldry, created at first by distress, is whetted by every species of stimulating novelty. Medusas, Gorgons, Black Dwarfs [three other Radical weeklies] and all the monstrous progeny begotten by disaffection upon ignorance, are heaped on the table or in the windows, with hideous profusion, and the money which should be expended in buying bread for their famishing families is often squandered in the purchase of such pestilent publications.' (The Times, 11 August 1819).
4 Cap of Liberty, 29 September 1819.
should be kept. The proprietor might call it ‘The Cap of Liberty’, ‘Country Reformers’ Newsroom and Cooking House’, ‘Liberty Hall’, or give it any other appellation they may like better. In my opinion, 2d. a time calling, paid by each person, would be sufficient to maintain the above, for which, besides the benefit of seeing and hearing the news, enjoying a warm fire, and liberty for to cook for themselves [sic], the Reformers might have a pint of ginger beer or treacle beer. They might wait an hour or two for work &c without being put to much expense; and by such accommodation they would ensure their health, improve their minds, enrich their pockets, reduce the revenue, and have the pleasure of meeting friends of Reform from all part[s] of the country.

Newsrooms were certainly not organized invariably on party lines; otherwise Lord Lowther could not have informed his father, Lord Lonsdale, in 1823 that County members of Parliament often supplied the newsrooms of the principal towns in their constituencies with complete sets of the printed Parliamentary Papers, at an expense of about £4 10s. a year. He inquired: ‘Would you wish that I should order them to be sent to the newsroom at Whitehaven? We do so to Appleby.’

The Medusa, or Penny Politician, declared in September 1819 that reading societies had recently been established in London and a number of manufacturing towns. Pamphlets and ‘independent’ (that is, Radical) newspapers were read at meetings on Sundays and in the evenings. The establishment of ‘Political Reading Societies’ all over the country would, it was suggested, greatly accelerate the progress of Reform, and Sundays would be much better employed in this way than by ‘echoing discord to the sonorous notes and thumpings of a methodistical ignoramus, who picks the pockets and darkens the understandings of his audience at the same time.’

These reading societies were distinct from the ‘Political Protestant Associations’, of which the prototype was established at Hull in July 1818. They were so called because they protested against ‘the mockery of their indisputable right to a real representation’ in Parliament. They planned weekly meetings in classes of not more than twenty, with a penny-a-week subscription to cover the cost of newspapers. ‘We sincerely believe that political ignorance has been the cause of all our national misery and degradation, and that nothing but a firm and extensive Union of the people to promote and diffuse a more correct knowledge of our immutable rights, can possibly protect our country either from absolute despotism on the one hand, or a dreadful revolution and anarchy on the other.’ A member of the Association at Credition reported in October 1818 that they met regularly once a week for the purpose of ‘perusing such periodical and other works as are calculated to afford political informa-

1 Private Lonsdale MSS. Lord Lowther to Lord Lonsdale, 2 April 1823.
2 Medusa, 11 September 1819.
3 Black Dwarf, 19 August 1818.
tion'. A few months later, Wooler, the editor of the *Black Dwarf*, said that these Associations were being formed all over the country. From the constant publicity which he gave their proceedings we may perhaps infer that his newspaper was taken in by these Societies. They were doubtless as short-lived as the *Black Dwarf* itself: they were the product of that agitation for a radical reform of Parliament, the abolition of sinecures and pensions, and the repeal of the 'Waterloo' Corn Law which was crushed or driven underground by the repressive legislation of 1819.

These Political Protestant Associations did not originate the habit of reading newspapers aloud. Some of the middle-class and working-class Reformist Societies which flourished during the French Revolutionary period, such as the London Corresponding Society, of which Thomas Hardy, the shoemaker, was Secretary, used this method of disseminating news. Explaining the practice in 1793, James Lomax, a member of the Manchester Reformation Society, said: 'We had nothing else to pass our time away with, and [we wished] to see how public affairs were going on.' A Tory member of Parliament, Sir Thomas Turton, alleged in 1807, on the authority of an Admiral of the Fleet, that the practice of reading newspapers on board ship at nightly meetings had unsettled the minds of our sailors, and had helped to produce that disaffection which had culminated in the naval mutinies of 1797.

In 1829 Thomas Attwood founded the Birmingham Political Union to promote the cause of Parliamentary Reform. It originated the practice, which continued for many years, of having newspapers read at large public meetings. During the ensuing struggle for the Reform Bill, people met in Union Street and other Birmingham thoroughfares during their dinner hour and in the evenings, to hear the news of the day. This happened too during the Chartist agitation. On 4 July 1839, for example, a crowd of at least 800 people met in the Bull Ring, Birmingham, and paid

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1 *Black Dwarf*, 11 November 1818.
3 *State Trials*, xxiii, col. 1136. Trial of Thomas Walker and others, for a Conspiracy.
4 *Parl. Deb.*, vol. ix, col. 1054 (4 August 1807). The little evidence there is to support this suggestion is given in Conrad Gill, *The Naval Mutinies of 1797*. The London Evening Post (11 May 1797) said that 'some persons from London had been distributing handbills through the fleet, inflaming the minds of the seamen'. The *True Briton* (9 May 1797) declared: 'We yesterday learnt that the present ferment in the fleet arose from a gross misrepresentation of what passed a few days ago in Parliament, upon the subject of the late complaints of the seamen conveyed through the medium of a Jacobin evening newspaper, which got on board the fleet.' The reference is probably to the *Courier*, which was mentioned by a Secret Committee of the House of Commons as having helped to foment the Mutiny. The following quotation shows how these 'seditious' prints circulated among the ships: 'On 5 or 6 May a boat from the *Mars* came alongside the *Queen Charlotte*. The men in the boat threw in a bundle of newspapers through a lower-deck port-hole, and shouted that Parliament was going to refuse the promised redress.' (C. Gill, *The Naval Mutinies of 1797*, pp. 49-50, 304). This view of the cause of the mutinies is not endorsed by Dobrée and Manwaring, *The Floating Republic*. 
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'very polite attention to a person reading a newspaper'.1 The police attacked with their truncheons and the meeting was broken up.

In his Memoirs, Viscount Snowden said that he had often heard his father relate how, in the Chartist days, a number of Yorkshire hand-loom weavers contributed 4d. a week to buy a copy of the Leeds Mercury, and with these coppers he was sent to a village four miles away every week to get the paper; and then the subscribers met in a cottage and he read the news to them.2

Henry Goulburn, the Tory politician, explained in 1836 how the working classes often associated for the purpose of reading newspapers in common. A newspaper was generally taken in by the employer. When he had finished with it he would hand it over to his household servants, from whom it found its well-thumbed way to the labourers.3 At a much earlier period we hear of Scottish newspapers being passed on from one farm to another until a single copy had covered practically the whole of a parish.4 In his Autobiography Thomas Cooper, the Chartist, tells how a number of brushmakers in his native town, Gainsborough, jointly subscribed for papers like Wooler's Black Dwarf, Cobbett's Political Register, and the News.5

Coffee-houses in the towns, public-houses in town and village, and gin-shops were, together, more important agencies for the dissemination of newspaper information than were either public meetings or Radical Reformist Societies. We find that in 1793 the London Corresponding Society kept the coffee houses and taverns in Edinburgh (and, presumably, not in Edinburgh alone) supplied with copies of the Courier, then an Opposition newspaper.6 The trial of Dr. William Hudson on 9 December 1793 for sedition yields an interesting reference to the New London Coffee House, and the newspapers it took in. Arriving there about seven in the evening on the preceding 30 September, the defendant called for a newspaper, sat down in a box,7 in the open coffee-room, and began reading aloud the account of the defeat of the Dutch troops. John Buchanan, a Glasgow 'manufacturer', who gave evidence at the trial, was sitting in a chair at the end of the next box, and, like other people near, heard all that the accused was saying. John Leech, the proprietor, deposed that the defendant and his companion, Mr. Pigott, 'called for several papers, in fact, I believe all the papers, and as they called them they read different

5 Thomas Cooper, Life, written by himself, p. 36.
7 For these boxes see W. Lovett's Life and Struggles, vol. i, p. 85 (1929).
paragraphs from them, and commented on the paragraphs as they went on. Incidentally, they drank, not coffee, but glasses of punch.

Opponents of a cheap Press denied emphatically that the 4d. stamp duty debarred the poor from reading newspapers. Sir Charles Knightley, a Tory country gentleman, said that in London, coffee houses were to be found in every street. He added that even if the stamp duty was repealed altogether it would be impossible to buy a newspaper for less than 3d.; as it was, any newspaper published in London could be read and enjoyed with an excellent cup of coffee for half the money.

According to William Lovett, comparatively few coffee-houses and eating-houses in London in the 1820’s were frequented by working men. Those who worked at a distance from their homes generally got their meals at public houses. But the situation changed after the reduction of the stamp duty to 1d. in 1836. Lovett wrote:

To this cheap literature, and the subsequent cheap newspapers that resulted from our warfare, may be also traced the great extension of the coffee-rooms and reading-rooms of our large towns, and the mental and moral improvement resulting from their establishment.

Lovett himself opened a coffee-house in Greville Street in 1834, ‘one of the rooms being fitted up as a conversation-room, so as to separate the talkers from the readers’. He added: ‘I took in what at that time was considered a large supply of newspapers and periodicals, and had, moreover, a library attached to it of several hundred volumes.’

The Report of the Committee on the Import Duties, 1841, contains interesting facts about the London coffee-houses of the period. It was stated in evidence that there were not more than a dozen coffee-shops in London in 1815, but that the number had risen to 1600 or 1800 in 1840, and that new ones were opening at the rate of nearly a hundred a year.

1 State Trials, vol. xxi, col. 1022, 1025.
4 Ibid., vol. i, p. 64.
5 That is, the struggle of the unstamped Press against the Government.
6 W. Lovett, Life and Struggles, vol. i, p. 89 (1929). The Dublin Evening Post of 7 September 1826 had an advertisement offering London newspapers at 4d. each (the price in England was 7d.). Staunton, the editor and proprietor of the Morning Register, a Dublin paper, thought that the advertisement had been inserted by some coffee-house keeper in Dublin, who received the London papers in the morning, used them until evening, and then posted them to country subscribers at half price. (H. of C. Accounts and Papers, 1828, vol. xv, p. 325). Alexander Mackay, the proprietor of the Belfast Newsletter, said in 1826 that ‘the coffee-room’ in Belfast was one of the few places which subscribed for the Dublin newspapers. (Ibid., p. 331). A handbill printed by ‘Connor, Printer, Circulating-Library, Castle-street, Cork’, advertising the forthcoming appearance of a bi-weekly paper, to be called The Cork Herald: or Munster Advertiser, stated, in its concluding paragraph: ‘Subscribers’ names to this paper will be received by Messrs. White, Harris, Edwards, Haly, and Connor, Booksellers, and at the Bar of each Coffee-House.’ The paper was started early in 1798. (State Paper Office, Dublin Castle. Rebellion Papers, 620/35/85).
One of them, which charged 1½d. a cup, had from 1,500 to 1,800 customers daily. James Pamphilon, keeper of the Crown Coffee House, at 3 and 4, Sherrard Street, Haymarket, said that he took in 43 daily newspapers, and that he had five or six copies of some of them (eight copies of the *Morning Chronicle*); all these were for the sole use of his customers. In addition, he took in seven provincial and six foreign papers, 24 magazines, four quarterly Reviews, and eleven weekly periodicals, and any customer who bought a cup of coffee could read anything he pleased. He said that the reason why he had from 1,600 to 1,800 customers daily was, partly the low price of his coffee, partly the excellence of his supply of newspapers. He had found that the desire to read newspapers had increased. All classes of people frequented his house, but the majority were artisans; the 'more respectable' classes used the two best of his three rooms. J. B. Humphreys, keeper of the coffee house at 41, High Holborn, who had from 400 to 450 customers daily, said that before the reduction of the stamp duty in 1836 he had paid £400 a year for newspapers, magazines, and the cost of binding back numbers for the use of his customers.\(^1\)

As for rural workers, they found in the village ale-house a meeting-place where they might hear the news read, even if they could not read it themselves.\(^2\) Cobbett said in 1807 that newspapers were then reaching a much wider public than was the case a quarter of a century earlier. Where was one to find an ale-house without a newspaper? 'Ask the landlord why he takes the newspaper; he'll tell you that it attracts people to his house; and in many ways its attractions are much stronger than those of the liquor there drunk, thousands upon thousands of men having become sots through the attractions of these vehicles of novelty and falsehood.'\(^3\)

Henry Hetherington, who played a leading part in the struggle for an untaxed Newspaper Press during the early 1830's, particularly recommended his *Penny Papers for the People* to the proprietors of coffee houses and 'the new beer shops', where working men would be able 'to improve the condition of their minds and bodies at one and the same time'.\(^4\) But those who cared for the morals of the working man objected to his being sent to the public house to read a newspaper, and preferred that he should be in a position to have one in his own cottage. The reduction or repeal of the newspaper stamp duty, therefore, urged the temperance party, would

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1 Extracts from the evidence are quoted in C. Badham's *Life of James Deacon Hume*, pp. 271-74.
2 In the middle of the eighteenth century an innkeeper made a charge for the use of his newspapers. Parson Woodforde wrote in his *Diary*, 5 September 1761: 'For reading the newspapers at Ansford Inn, 7d.'; and on 12 August 1762: 'Went with Mr. Clarke over to Ansford Inn to read the news, where I pd. 4½d.' (vol. i, pp. 18, 21). There is no mention of a charge in a later entry (1 July 1779): 'About noon I walked down to Cary with brother Heighes and read the London paper at the George Inn' (vol. i, p. 254).
3 *Cobbett's Political Register*, 26 September 1807.
4 Quoted in *Quarterly Review*, vol. xlii, p. 302 (January 1831).
vastly improve the general condition of the people. 'We go to the public	house', said a working man, 'to read the sevenpenny paper, but only for
the news. It is the cheap penny paper that the working man can take home
and read at spare moments, which he has by him to take up and read over
and over again, whenever he has leisure, that forms his opinions."

Public houses were disliked by frightened Tories during the period of
the French Revolution because they were places where the lower orders
talked sedition and voiced their discontent. Godwin called the public
house the labourer's University, where men were educated into citizenship.
Even small public houses in London (comprising tap-room, bar and parlour)
would usually take in two daily newspapers; the average gin-
shop would have one. A single copy of Cobbett's Political Register, which
cost 15. 0½d. in 1815, could be read by, or read out to, scores of country
folk at a public house. Southey told Lord Liverpool in 1817 that repressive
laws would be altogether nugatory so long as papers like Cobbett's Register
and Hone's Register were 'read aloud in every ale-house' and wherever
soldiers met together. Lord Lowther said in 1821 that the scandalous
Tory weekly paper, John Bull, was read in all the public houses. Words-
worth suggested that much good might be done if clergymen, country
gentlemen, and 'leading manufacturers and tradesmen' would use their
influence in introducing loyal newspapers into public houses. 'There are
numberless places, thank God, yet left in the country, where a publican
would as readily take in a good newspaper as a bad one.'

Cobbett, however, was told in 1816 that at three public houses in one
country town the landlords had objected to meetings for reading the
Political Register being held on their premises, for fear they should lose
their licenses. It was this circumstance which caused Cobbett suddenly to
reduce the price of his paper to 2d. in November of that year, publishing
it in a form which required no stamp. His example was quickly followed
by others, who were not always on the Radical side. The Government

2 A licensed victualler wrote a letter to The Times about his expenses, which was
published on 25 January 1817. The main items were as follows: rent £50, coal £30, two
servants £45, oil and candles £18, newspapers (two a day) £20. The total amounted to
£150 a year, plus £50 for rent. On the other hand, he said, the expenses of the gin-shop
proprietor were much smaller. He took in only one newspaper, and his total expenses,
not including rent, were less than £55 a year.
3 C. D. Yonge, Life of Lord Liverpool, vol. ii, p. 298. The Queen's Stores, a public house
in Whittle Street, Manchester, in 1843 had a separate newsroom, a large room with a
bagatelle board in it; but when asked whether it was a public newsroom, the publican
replied, 'There is very little news read in it' (Trial of Feargus O'Connor . . . 1 March 1843,
p. 119).
4 Private Lonsdale MSS. Lord Lowther to Lord Lonsdale, 5 February 1821.
5 Ibid. Wordsworth to Lord Lonsdale, n.d. (c. 1820).
6 He continued the more expensive edition for the benefit of his more prosperous
readers. 'The form is valuable', he said, 'because, being capable of being collected into
volumes, and easily referred to, the contents have effect long after their dates' (Cobbett's
Political Register, 16 November 1816).
and its supporters, indeed, paid Cobbett the compliment of imitating his methods. He was to be ‘written down’. ‘Accordingly, up sprang all the little pamphlets at Norwich, Romsey, Oxford and many other places, while in London there were several, one of which could not cost less than 2,000 guineas in advertising in large and expensive placards.’

When Gibbons Merle (editor of the *Courier* during the premiership of Lord Grey) started a Tory 4d. weekly, the *White Dwarf*, in opposition to Wooler’s *Black Dwarf* and similar papers, he too suggested that working men, who could obviously not afford individual copies, should share one. He exhorted them also to leave the public house (where, presumably, they had been accustomed to read Cobbett’s *Register*), and to drink their beer and porter by their own fire-sides, with their wives and ‘pretty little Prattlers’ around them.

William Hone thus summarises the Government’s efforts at counter-propaganda in 1817:

Anti-Cobbetting is all over: there will be no more printing at 1d. a sheet, to be 1d. less than Cobbett’s Political Pamphlet; no more leaving them in at coffee houses and on tap-room tables; no more sending them gratis to ‘well-disposed people’, and dropping them down areas; no more coaxing and pushing and wheedling people to take them in for the use of the servants and apprentices. It was all up-hill, unprofitable work, whilst it lasted; for, like brother Jackson, of the *Romsey Register*, they could get nobody to read them—they might be bought by the great folks, to give away, to be sure—but as to an independent journeyman or mechanic or handicraftsman being enticed to purchase the Anti-Cobbett for 1½d., why, it was like offering a 1½d. ounce of salts to a famishing man who wanted to lay out 2d. in buying a loaf.

Nor did the authorities frown even upon public meetings when the purpose was to counteract poisonous Radical prints. Gibbons Merle urged manufacturers, landowners and other employers of labour to summon meetings of their workpeople, at which they were requested to read aloud, several times, a long Address ‘To the Labouring Classes of Society’, which formed a large part of the second number of the *White Dwarf*—just as, with a different purpose, Cobbett had written Addresses to the Reformers and to the Journeymen and Labourers.

For a short time after November 1816 the sale of Cobbett’s twopenny *Political Register* rose to 40,000 or 50,000 copies a week: a figure many times larger than that of any other newspaper; and, too, a single copy

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2 *White Dwarf*, 6 December 1817.
3 *Hone’s Reformists’ Register*, 12 April 1817.
4 On 4 January 1817 Cobbett published an exposure of Jackson’s ‘loyal’ paper, which was called a *Register*, with Cobbett’s name printed in large type near the head of the front page: the intention was to make people believe that they were buying Cobbett’s own paper—so he said.
5 *White Dwarf*, 6 December 1817.
6 *Cobbett’s Political Register*, 26 October and 2 November 1816.
frequently served for scores of auditors.\(^1\) Samuel Bamford, the Lancashire Reformer, said that the *Political Register* was read on nearly every cottage hearth in the manufacturing districts of South Lancashire, Leicester, Derby and Nottingham, and in many of the Scottish manufacturing towns.\(^2\) The editor of the *Gorgon*, a penny paper started on 23 May 1818,\(^3\) claimed that it was being very widely circulated in Manchester.\(^4\) Lord Liverpool was deeply impressed in 1819 by the comparison between the number of cheap papers in 1780, or even 1809, with that of his day. Cheap tracts were being circulated, he said, for half-pence and farthings throughout the country.\(^5\) Sydney Smith remarked at the same time that there were then four times as many readers as there were before the French Revolution.\(^6\)

In view of the open hostility of the authorities, and considering that, as an unstamped journal, the *Political Register* could not be sent by post; Cobbett's achievement was a remarkable one. Shopkeepers all over the country, in towns and villages, were invited to act as selling agents. They were requested to send a regular weekly order to the London publisher, giving him 'very plain' directions as to the coach by which the parcel was to be dispatched, and the inn from which the coach started in London. With every parcel sent into the country a placard was enclosed for display in the shopkeeper's window, so that the public would know where the *Register* was on sale.\(^7\) As the wholesale price was 12s. 6d. a hundred (11s. if at least 1,000 copies were ordered regularly by one individual week by week) the profit on the sale of a few hundreds was, as Cobbett pointed out, sufficient to support a small family.\(^8\) One man, who lived in a cottage by the side of a Common, had made a profit of 75s. within two or three weeks by selling 1,800 of the twopenny *Registers*, taking them to all the neighbouring towns and villages.\(^9\) Cobbett suggested that one good way of increasing the sale was for the shopkeeper to send for a thousand copies weekly and then employ others to hawk them about the country at 12s.

\(^1\) *Cobbett's Political Register*, 16 November 1816. Sir Robert Wilson wrote to his friend Lord Grey, (6 November 1816): 'I sent you yesterday a paper of Cobbett's which is circulating with wings through the country. Many thousand were sold in a few hours' (*Brit. Mus. Addit. MSS.* 30121 [Sir R. Wilson Papers], fo. 197). He wrote again, two days later: 'The sale of Cobbett's paper has been prodigious. One bookseller sold 40,000, and above half a million have been distributed' (*Ibid.*, fo. 202).


\(^3\) He had to raise the price to 1d. on 3 October. 'It is only since the establishment of cheap publications', he said (16 January 1819) 'that the Press has become such a mighty engine in the cause of truth and the rights of man. The old Press was exclusively devoted either to the two aristocratical factions, which divided the Government, or the trading classes of the community . . . The working classes had no support from any of them; they had no oracle to proclaim their wrongs or advocate their interests.'

\(^4\) *Gorgon*, 25 July 1818.

\(^5\) *Parl. Deb.* vol. xli, col. 739 (6 December 1819).


\(^7\) *Cobbett's Political Register*, 16 November 1816.

\(^8\) *Ibid.*, 30 November 1816.

\(^9\) *Cobbett's Political Register*, 7 December 1816.
NEWSPAPERS IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY

6d. or 13s. a hundred. There is no doubt that this method was frequently used.

The sale inevitably fell off sharply in 1820, when the Newspaper Stamp Duties Act (one of the 'Six Acts') compelled him to raise the price to 6d. In 1827 he was selling less than 400 copies of the stamped Register a week, and the sale of the unstamped edition cannot have been large, since few people living in the provinces got their copy at all regularly. Country towns, it is true, had agents, but they could not undertake delivery to the villages, and even some of the towns received the Register only once a fortnight. Cobbett said in 1827 that for seven years people in the country had been constantly complaining of the non-arrival of their copy. The parcels were generally sent into the provinces by stage coach, but the guard often failed to collect or deliver them. So Cobbett advised his readers to buy the stamped edition, which they would be sure to receive with unfailing regularity. The price had risen to 6d., and stamped Registers only were to be published after December 1827, at a shilling, but he suggested that the number of readers need not decline. 'Little knots of friends' could meet at one another's houses to read the Register, and one of them could order it from a London newsman. When prosecuting Cobbett in 1831 for publishing a seditious libel, the Attorney-General admitted that though the price was a shilling the labouring classes all over the country still contrived to read the Register. They clubbed together, and sat 'in great societies' to read it, and it had 'a prodigious effect'.

In April 1817 William Hone claimed that his own Register found its way into most English counties. To extend the sale into areas not already covered, he invited the co-operation of friends who would establish agencies in their neighbourhoods.

Generally speaking, the persons who sold Mr. Cobbett's Weekly Political Pamphlet will be most suitable, because, as my own principles... have been those on which Mr. Cobbett conducted that publication, and as the Reformists' Register is consequently continued on such principles, Mr. Cobbett's readers will doubtless take it in the country, as they do in London and other parts of the kingdom, where it is known. It is now higher in circulation than any daily or weekly publication whatever—it is higher than the highest of them in sale, by many thousand copies, and increases every week; but the exertions of my...

1 Cobbett's Political Register, 28 December 1816.
2 Unstamped publications could not be sent by post.
3 From time to time Cobbett printed in his Register the names and addresses of all the London newsmen. He said that they were in general very respectable men, supplying all who applied to them, irrespective of their politics or religion. They supplied all London newspapers, without exception. (Cobbett's Political Register, 1 December 1827).
4 State Trials, N.S. vol. ii, cols. 804, 855. 'It is taken in in many places where the poor are in the habit constantly of resorting.'
5 'I hope in God it has', ejaculated Cobbett. 'Nothing has given me more delight than to hear him say that.' (Ibid., c. 855).
6 Hone's Reformists' Register, 19 April 1817.
country friends I shall still be thankful for. Applications for the Reformists’ Register should be made to the different persons who sold Mr. Cobbett’s Weekly Political Pamphlet. Country orders addressed to Mr. Hone, 67, Old Bailey, with remittances, or appointing payment in London, and mentioning the conveyance parcels are to be sent by, will be punctually executed, and bills and placards to hang at doors and shop windows enclosed.¹

In 1789 the practice of hiring out newspapers at a small charge (a penny seems to have been the usual sum) had been made illegal under a penalty of £5. George Rose, then Secretary of the Treasury, stated that the practice dated from 1776. A single copy would be hired out to 20 or 30 readers in London, and would subsequently be sent into the country at a reduced price to compete unfairly with the provincial newspapers² The Times declared that newspapers lent out to read were afterwards returned as unsold—‘an imposition which had grown to a prodigious evil’. ‘This practice is not only a material hurt to the revenue, but likewise great injury to the proprietors.’³ This illegal practice continued almost unchecked, and there were often to be found in the advertisement columns of provincial newspapers offers to lend a copy of The Times. Roebuck said in 1835 that the law prohibiting the lending of newspapers was no longer enforced.⁴ Staunton, the proprietor of the Dublin Morning Register, said in 1826 that the cost to a citizen of Dublin of the use of a daily newspaper was only a penny a day. One paper served five, six or even seven families. It was the general practice among Dublin newsvendors to hire out their papers, and to post them in the evening to country readers at half-price.⁵

¹ Hone was not the only Radical publisher who experienced difficulty in collecting money from country agents; the writing off of bad debts was probably inevitable whenever vigorous efforts were made to push the sale. His Register came to an end on 25 October 1817 (it had started on 1 February of that year). He explained that the bad conduct of some of his agents in the country had proved a grievous embarrassment. ‘Some have punctually and honestly paid me. Others have not only not been punctual, but have not paid me, whilst my inability to regulate my accounts when I was in confinement, and the necessity I have been under of attending a little to what business I found when I came out, and to the writing of the Register, prevented me from taking such steps as a keen tradesman might have done to enforce payment. One person, by repeated representations of activity and connexion and good will, induced me to send him the Register in large quantities every week, besides other goods, agreeable to his orders. I repeatedly wrote him for money, and he always promised, and put off. Being loth to discontinue the sale of the Register in a populous district, and he being the only agent in the county of Hampshire, I continued to forward them to him regularly. I have never been able to get the money from him for what he has sold, or to get back the publications which remain unsold. He has not paid me a sixpence! This is to be sure the worst specimen of my usage, but there are others nearly as bad. These remarks, however, do not apply to the present vendors of the Register at Birmingham, Bath, Bury, Maidstone, Norwich, Nottingham or Oxford; and I would especially except Mr. Wroe of Manchester, whose honourable conduct deserves my most honourable mention. The continuance of the Register, with decreased sale, and other inconveniences, added to the disadvantages I have mentioned, has become embarrassing to me.’ (Hone’s Reformists’ Register, 25 October 1817.)

² Parliamentary Register, H. of C. vol. xxvi, p. 344 (3 July 1789).
³ The Times, 27 June 1789.
⁵ H. of C. Accounts and Papers, 1828, vol. xv, pp. 323, 325.
The *Anti-Jacobin* had highly approved and 'earnestly recommended' the practice of lending its numbers to poorer neighbours.¹

The striking success of the Newspaper Press in reaching the masses in spite of the tremendous handicaps of oppressive taxation and severe legal restraints, is not without its importance in English history. The multiplication of newspaper readers gradually produced a revolution in our government by increasing the number of those who exercised some sort of judgement on public affairs. Pitt's friend and colleague, Lord Grenville, considered that the Press was the most powerful of the agencies which produced the French Revolution, and he thought in 1817 that in England, too, the popular Press might be sufficiently influential to bring about a revolution. 'The seditious writers of the present day, who deluged the country . . . with their wicked and blasphemous productions, did not make it a question by whom the Government was to be administered, but whether a Government should exist at all.' The Press was a far more important instrument of progress than the Platform, at any rate until the Anti-Corn Law League demonstrated the possibilities of large-scale, high-pressure agitation by means of public meetings; and even the League owed much of its success to its mass-propaganda by the agency of cheap newspapers and pamphlets. All the great reforms of the period, such as the abolition of slavery and the slave trade, catholic emancipation, the Reform Bill of 1832 and the repeal of the corn laws, were preceded by long periods of agitation, of which the Newspaper Press was an indispensable instrument. For many years Cobbett and lesser journalists agitated against political sinecures and the swollen pension list. It was their propaganda which made the very word pensioner appear loathsome and revolting; had they not succeeded in impressing their views on the people there would have been no thorough-going abolition of sinecure places and no reform of the Pension List after 1832; we should not have heard complaints of old-fashioned 'Tories of 'the cowardly desire' of many members of Parliament to 'curry favour with their constituents' by criticising the Pension List in 1830 and subsequent years. It was the mass pressure of public opinion, formed by the Radical Press, acting on a reluctant Legislature, which brought about the reform of Parliament in 1832, and this great achievement was made possible only by the success of the conductors of the Press in reaching, by ways indicated in the foregoing pages, a very much larger public than, judging from the circulation statistics, one would have thought possible.

¹ *Anti-Jacobin*, 9 July 1798 (the last number). It declared that it had 2,500 subscribers, and, since everyone's family might 'reasonably' be supposed to consist of seven, the number of readers could be taken to be 17,500, or 50,000, including the 'poorer neighbours' to whom the paper was passed on.