

THE GEOGRAPHY OF MANIPULATION: THE BRITISH TABLOIDS

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Introduction Due to developments in communication networks and technological innovations in the last fifty years, more people than ever before in the earth's history have potential access to a constant supply of information. This information, however, is often presented in a simplified, abbreviated, uncomplicated manner. Those who administer the dissemination of information contend that this makes it easy for the public to assimilate. Yet these people, by their actions, arguably shape the popular perception of events and the popular view of the world. They wield quite considerable power and their decisions impinge on all aspects of our lives. It is only the degree to which this imposed world view infiltrates society, diffuses across national and class boundaries, permeates our thinking processes and affects our actions and decision-making capacities that is in question:

"The influence of mental phenomena on the organisation and development of human societies is just as great as that of economic and demographic factors. Men's behaviour is shaped, not so much by their real condition as by their usually untruthful image of that condition, by behavioural models which are cultural productions bearing only a potential resemblance to material realities".(Duby,1985)

This essay focuses on the medium of the newspaper and more specifically, the tabloid as a vehicle for the dissemination of information and the perpetuation of ideologies. It should be borne in mind that in most instances what is stated here is applicable also to the media of television and radio, especially in the light of relatively recent developments. The contention that those involved in the dissemination of information are oblivious to the amount of power they wield should be dispelled when one considers the remarks of just two people involved in the newspaper industry. Hearst, an American newspaper magnate left the U.S. President of the day in no doubt that it was people like Hearst himself and not politicians who really ran the country (MacAmhlaigh,1988). In more recent times Rupert Murdoch, another newspaper magnate, when questioned about the extent to which his own views were perceived to permeate a particular newspaper, ominously reflected "I did not come all this way not to interfere"

(Ní Chionnfhaolaidh 1987). Methods of manipulation vary. The simplest is the order in which items are covered. One would expect the importance of news items to be reflected in the order in which they are relayed. By giving undue prominence to particular items the media can bias popular perception. A most insidious method of perceptual creation is to purposefully omit certain facts from items covered or to omit some newsworthy items completely. Interpreting silence, therefore, is a very important task when addressing an issue such as this.

Early newspapers had a limited range of appeal because of high illiteracy rates. The proprietors of these newspapers knew from the outset that they were dealing with a very specific clientele and the ideological and philosophical bias of the early newspapers clearly reflects that of the customers. An example of this was provided by MacAmhlaigh (1988) who quoted the following from The Tuam Herald, 13 May, 1837:

"A wretched woman of the name of Jordan, residing in Castle Street (Roscommon) left her child (an infant about three months old) in the charge of a little boy on Wednesday last whilst she went to a neighbouring house. The boy, on finding the child asleep, went out closing the door leaving a pig in the house. Upon the return of the mother she found the arms and a great portion of the child's body shockingly mangled, and almost all the flesh devoured by the pig. The wretched spectacle it presented was really horrifying. The child was quite dead".

This perpetuated the popular perception of Irish people and society among the British upper classes resident in Ireland at whom this newspaper was aimed. It could be argued that this in many respects is what the people reading the newspaper wanted to read and that this form of reporting was a prerequisite for the financial viability of the newspaper. Sight should never be lost of the fact that newspapers apart from being vehicles for the dissemination of information are also vehicles for the accumulation of profit. Newspapers are business enterprises, they are profit-seeking or profit-making endeavours. Business people, companies and syndicates that control or own newspapers invest in them seeking a financial return. A pre-requisite for the proprietorship of a commercial newspaper is the ability to purchase it and this either implies wealth or access to wealth. As a

result the shaping of popular perception has generally been the preserve of the wealthy:

"The first purpose of newspapers is to sell and many of them (proprietors) found out that truth and objectivity are not necessary items at all when it comes to making money" (MacAmhlaigh, 1988)

Not only do newspapers reflect the values and convictions of their owners, but they must of necessity coincide to some significant degree with that of the potential customer. They have to reflect the prevailing mood of the class or classes at which they are aimed in a particular time period or era. The inherent danger in this is that once readerships have been established, proprietors can and do allow their own views to increasingly permeate and eventually dominate the publications. The proprietors' interests will always be served and in this respect MacAmhlaigh writes:

"...newspapers, alas, are as likely to mislead their readers as to tell them the truth. Often the deception is intentional, a definite line of policy being pursued by the owners...."

The tabloids that this essay focuses on are The Sun, The Star and The Daily Mirror. The purpose was to seek to establish if a certain ideological stance or philosophy was being promoted and if a particular world view was being perpetuated. When Rupert Murdoch took over The Sun in 1969, he implemented a policy of less space to political and current affairs coverage and more to human interest stories, photographs and cartoons. It became a hugely successful entertainment based tabloid. The Daily Mirror was once a left wing paper and was taken over by Robert Maxwell, a former Labour M.P. who was very much to the right of his party. He has committed all of his newspapers to what he calls "the sensible left". Along with The Star, these papers present a united view of the world, invoking the "national interest" and promoting symbols of national unity such as the Royal Family and British sporting heroes. A feeling of commonality and homeliness is achieved by focusing public attention on a series of stereotyped public enemies, such as youth gangs, student radicals and muggers. The main stories in the tabloids, the eye catching ones on page one, are titillating human interest stories which use sex to sell. There are stories of rape, murder or sexual assault in every paper. The stories

are relayed with a relish for detail which can only be described as "soft porn".

Between 10-25 November, 1986, all three of these newspapers were monitored. The news items covered were categorised. This resulted in a threefold division of material: Women and Sex, Aids and Political Commentaries, and Insularity and Race Relations.

Women and Sex The first story of interest concerns the Royal's "magic carpet tour of Arabia" which began on November 11. The tour is used as a springboard for British nationalist pride. The Saudi laws forbidding women to appear in public without their "Yashmak" and five layers of clothing are compared with the "freedom" of Britain, where "page three" girls appear in tabloids every day. The Star (Nov 12) says in a commentary, "All Arab women have to do when they come over here (Britain) is learn not to steal and stop beating their servants". The Star leads on November 11 with "Di Sheiks a Leg!" and "Diana sox it to 'em again". There are similar reports in The Sun: "Kneasy does it for Di" and all because Princess Diana was wearing a pair of pop-socks on her way to Oman. When she arrived in Saudi Arabia it is: "Di blows in... with a slip-up" (The Mirror, p.1, Nov.18), and "Di gives the Arabs a right thighful" (The Sun, p.2, Nov.18). These incidents give the papers a chance to reinforce British superiority for its sexual freedom. The Arabs are "prudish" and "they gasped when her thin blue dress swirled up as she walked down the steps of her plane in Saudi Arabia".

This and other stories about the Royal family, centres mostly on the women and what they are wearing. This is what it is believed interests women. The Royal women are chastised by The Sun for their giggling and laughing on "Poppy Day" and also by The Star for their hats on the same day. If Diana gets a hair-cut it's front page news. There is an attempt to treat the Royals as the property of the awe-inspired public. Yet, they are also "one of the crowd"; ordinary people like the rest of us. Women are encouraged to identify with "Di" and "Fergie" and to live their lives with them. Yet there is another aspect to the treatment of the Royal women. They may make front page news but stories concerning them are trivialised. They are part of a national show piece of which the people are obliged to be proud. The women represent British womanhood, and it is a cause for great

celebrations by the tabloids when Diana is liked by her Arab hosts.

The criticism of the Royals goes no further than their clothes.

With the trivialising of the Royal women, goes the trivialising of women in general, which is portrayed most openly in the "page three" phenomenon. This is a photograph of a half-naked woman who is invariably smiling and looking provocatively out of the page. A short commentary goes with the photograph which contains none too subtle sexual innuendo. For example, on November 10, in The Sun, with the picture of Samantha Fox goes the heading "Cor, go to bed with Our Sam!" They're trying to sell pillowcases with a picture of "Our Sam" on them. She can be bought and sold or given to friends for Christmas. The Sun (Nov 11) says of Ruth: "Here boys! Lovely Ruth is the kind of girl to get you straining at the leash....(her Alsatian puppy) may never make Crufts, but Ruth's pedigree guarantees her a prize spot on page three". Ruth is compared to her hound, she is an animal. She just has to sit there and look pretty so that the "boys" can come and get. While on the face of it, it seems permissive to have a naked woman in a newspaper, it, in fact, reinforces the stereotype of the female as victim, the passive one who must be beautiful and "display her wares" to attract the male. When Clare Short (Labour M.P.) started a campaign against "page three", she received hundreds of letters from women who spoke about the role of "page three" in contributing to instances of sexual abuse in which they were involved. The Sun subsequently started a campaign against "Crazy Clare" issuing "Save Page Three" car stickers. Yet, The Sun, on the same page as Ruth appears, condemns a boss who sexually harassed his employee, sending her "porn magazines". "Page three" and stories such as that about the "M4 sex fiend", no matter how much the tabloids pretend to condemn the perpetrator of the act, are both continuations of the same phenomenon of portraying women as victims. If a "page three" girl becomes famous, for example, in singing or acting, it is an occasion for the tabloid to congratulate itself on giving her a start. The success of an individual girl seems to justify the existence of the phenomenon.

The view of women in the Tabloids is a narrow one. They are one of nude on page three, somebody's wife or mother, somebody's mistress or girlfriend (rushing off to build a "love-" or "lust-nest") or victims of sexual or violent crimes. Whatever their position, they are pictured full length, as naked as possible, and rarely apart from their sexual role.

Aids and Political Commentaries The Aids syndrome acts as a rallying point for anti-homosexual feeling in the Tabloids. Mills, a columnist in The Star begins an article on November 11 with "The left-wing forces of darkness are mobilising" because he has been accused of racism and anti-homosexual tendencies. He then goes on to speak of "blacks and woofers". "This ghastly plague (aids)... is now spreading rapidly among heterosexuals, for the homos have managed to infect increasing numbers of normal people through an apocalyptic combination of bi-sexual go-betweens, prostitutes, and unbridled promiscuity". He also blames the West Indian community for spreading the disease.

In another article he pities the pupils of the "illfamed" Brent Borough of London as the council were advertising for anti-sexist and anti-racist careers officers. He asks: "What chance have they got when they go along to a job interview arranged by a black lesbian?" On November 18 he calls the Sex Discrimination Act "an absurd piece of Wilson gimmickry apparently enacted to allow women to breed on full pay" and complains that Princess Anne spent "three hours in the Socialist Republic of Islington in the company of the woofter mayor and his 'mayoress' - another male pervert". The Sun (Nov.12) also has something to say about this, calling Islington "London's paradise for loonies and lefties".

Mill's articles are typical of other ones such as Peter Tony's, also in The Star and "The Sun Says" and "The Star Says" columns. Their authors have New Right ideas. They wish to hold on to a glorious past before homosexuality and promiscuity were spoken about. There is no logic behind their ideas which are based upon prejudice and hatred. One cannot argue with them as their sole purpose is to arouse emotions. The columnist takes on the argumentative tone of pub rhetoric, for example, Mill's articles always end up with a story about a few of "the lads" in a pub called "The Welly". The columnist is "one of the lads", to be trusted. (S)he is speaking from his/her heart for the people.

"The Sun says", "The Star says", and "Mirror comment" are the most insidious columns as no reporter's name is given, so it appears as though there is concensus within the paper, as if all the voices join in unison. They usually comment on stories which are covered in the paper that day or on the previous day. The Sun supports Thatcher all the way. On November 10, it speculates "were a poll held tomorrow, the Tories would score a smashing success". There can be no doubt allowed to creep in that Thatcher might lose or that her administration's

policies have not been too successful: "Thatcherism has worked and is now starting to pay its social dividends without throwing financial rectitude to the full winds". ("Vincent's View", Nov.12). On November 21, "The Sun Says" is behind Thatcher's support of Reagan over Iran: "America is not perfect. But, under Mr. Reagan she has been our best, and sometimes our only friend. Her practical help was essential to our victory in the Falklands". They argue that Europe did nothing to help Britain in the Falklands war and the French even supplied the Argentines with missiles. The tabloids give the impression that America is England's only friend in an increasingly hostile Europe and world. The Sun speculates that if Labour gets into power "the nation, will be at the mercy of Marxist tyrants and it rejoices at the "Red clown", that is, that "Capitalism is coming back in Russia ... We are happy for the Russkies" that "the little man, the shopkeeper working for himself..." is returning. When The Sun mentions "free speech" it always means freedom for those whom it supports. The issue is raised on November 22 when there is a call for "nasty-minded louts" ("left wing" students at Nottingham University) to be caned. "If they (Universities) don't guarantee freedom of speech they (should) be cut off without a penny of taxpayers' money". On November 25, those who "hounded" Barclay's Bank out of South Africa are called "the usual rag bag of mischief-makers, Marxists and student pressure groups whose mouths are larger than their brains".

An accident which happened on B.B.C.'s Late, Late Breakfast Show resulting in a man's death was a chance for The Sun to criticize not only the programme but the whole corporation. "The Sun Says" calls for the producer to be sacked, and adds, "The B.B.C. has made enough appalling errors of judgement recently but at least until this week nobody has been killed by their crass incompetence". The Sun's outrage has more than a little to do with Murdoch's campaign against the B.B.C.'s "monopoly" and its licence fee, and is an effort to force the Government to have the Corporation privatized. He, like Robert Maxwell, would be the most likely to profit from the break-up of the Corporation.

Tough measures are advised for "thugs" (that is prisoners) and unions. On November 18, for example, "The Sun Says" advises the Government to "send for the troops" to keep prisoners under control as "The public are sickened by these softly, softly tactics". Prisoners have no rights because they are not "decent law-abiding folk". Also,

on November 12, "Top marks (are awarded) to Kenneth Baker" (Education Secretary) for his speech to the teachers' unions which included "You can talk all you like. You can make any deal you like. But you ain't getting any more money!" The Star blames teachers for "wrecking young lives" and complains that "the education system is in a mess at the moment - patently failing to educate youngsters properly for life in the high-tech world". It calls for an "Education Secretary - not hamstrung by the redtape of Whitehall". Thus, The Star wants schools to have freedom to educate without interference from the Government, and would incite teachers to "Dare to Teach". Similarly, The Sun and The Star campaign against the law which forbids shops to open on Sunday as this is Government interference in the freedom of the market.

Insularity and Race Relations As far back as Shakespeare in The Merchant of Venice the British had the reputation abroad for being insular. Judging by the tabloids, which are inhabited by a world of "show biz" personalities, soap-opera characters and fairytale princesses, little seems to have changed. Any "personalities" from beyond Britain, who manage to sneak into the "personality cult" of tabloids are usually disliked and abused. For example, John McEnroe (the American tennis player) is "the Superbrat", while Maradona (the Argentinian soccer player) is habitually referred to as "that cheat" - Princess Michael of Kent, who is German, is "Princess Pushy" and Madonna (American pop singer) and her husband Sean Penn, are known as "the Poison Penns". When the Irish are mentioned the headlines are "It's mad dogs and Irishmen" (The Star Nov 10) or "Blundermind! Irishman in quiz rumpus. I'm no cheat, he says" (The Sun Nov. 12). The Mirror devotes about a half page to Irish news everyday. It includes the usual "sex fiend" stories, stories of violence in the North of Ireland, and the big news in Ireland at the time. The Germans appear under such headlines as "Sour Krauts!", "prudish" and the Chinese are "Slitty Eyed Devils". Switzerland is a place where "stuffy officials" barred "Sexy Sammy" (Samantha Fox) from singing (Mirror Nov.19) and in America "The Law of the Jungle rules in America's violent cities" where anonymous muggers are pictured hitting a victim over the head with a steel bar. (The Sun Nov 21).

But, what is more interesting than what the tabloids say (which isn't exactly subtle) is what they don't say. They frequent a world where the biggest news is the exploits of soap-opera personalities,

where all arguments are quelled by name calling, where the "goodies" are 'Page Three' girls and the "baddies" are members of the Labour Party, foreigners, "thugs" and Government institutions. Left out completely from the public culture is the immigrant population. The only black people mentioned are singers and sports heroes. It's as if they didn't exist in "ordinary" life. However, when they are mentioned, they are blamed for spreading aids or in connection with violent riots. In The Star (Nov 18), for example, there is a report that "Police Chief warns of more violence". The Chief's words are quoted as: "the prospects for spontaneous outbreaks of serious public disorder in the inner city - particularly in St. Paul's - remain high ... The hard-core lawless element of Afro-Caribbean youths will be at the centre of those disorders". The stereotype of the riotous immigrant, ready to stir up trouble without cause, is once again reinforced.

Conclusion It can be seen that what can best be described as New Right ideas are indeed prevalent in the tabloids studied. The framework for looking at the world which they provide is nationalistic to the point of insularity. The tabloids' accounts of the Royal's Arabic tour is particularly revealing. There is no attempt to understand Arab culture. All aspects of Arab life are viewed from a British cultural perspective; with all judgements based on British values.

The tabloids promote stereotypes of men (providing them with a page three girl every day and six to seven pages of sports) and of women (providing them with human interest stories, problem pages and women's features). They have no tolerance for "gender-benders" (i.e. homosexuals), feminists, C.N.D. or any of the other new social movements. There is support of the Capitalist "free market", and an obsession with violence, crime and national security. There is no real political debate, but rather emotive outbursts with no politician asked to legitimate his or her stance formally. The tabloids focus on those in political office as the holders of power and not on the central influence of a decentered capital. The main reason for this is that some of the "decentered capital" is in the hands of the owners of these tabloids, for example, Murdoch's "News International" has annual profits of around £25 million. The proprietors use their newspapers to help along their business interests, for example, in 1980, Murdoch's support of Thatcher paid off in Westminster's rejection of a

monopolies commission inquiry on him. More recently, Murdoch and Maxwell are using pressure through their papers to undermine the B.B.C. and have it privatized. The anti-Labour, and anti-trade union feeling in The Sun may have a lot to do with the confrontation between the Printers' Union's and Murdoch who sacked 5,500 people in "News International" and employed new technology in their stead.

Yet, the ideology behind tabloids is not simply New Right. It is a mixture of the New Right and Neo-conservatism. The cognitive component of cultural modernity is embraced, as is the free market, there is encouragement of competition and traditional values such as the family and hard work, and neo-conservative government policies are supported. Yet, a pseudopopulist approach is taken to all issues. Through depoliticization of content due to market forces and proprietorial interests, a consensual view prevails in these papers. There are many contradictions within their world, but none great enough to suggest the contradictions and variety of opinions which exist in advanced capitalist society. This consensual view presumes a large, undifferentiated, beer-swilling, sex-starved audience. This view, and the popularity of tabloids, is achieved through a depoliticization of content, and an infusion of an entertainment content, which suggest that life is an "unchanging panorama of individual drama determined by the laws of human nature and the randomness of fate" (Curran and Seaton, 1985).

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