

Lord Northcliffe's Newspapers in the Great War

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Abstract

During the Great War, or World War I, news reports were being made on the battles against Germany from a western front, including the United Kingdom. The actions of press mogul Alfred Harmsworth played a small part in transforming the home front effort through the newspapers he acquired in his empire, and his confrontational methods. His newspapers reported on battlefield issues and confronted Parliament on said issues. Meanwhile, efforts from Parliament to create a propaganda machine would utilize Harmsworth's credentials in initiating efforts to establish an American presence on the war effort. Through investigation of the growing empire he accumulated and the conflicts he endured, this manuscript will explore how Harmsworth has become an important figure in British press history.

Keywords: Britain, Europe, Great War, Alfred Harmsworth, Journalism

During the Great War of 1914 to 1918, journalism covered the affairs and philosophies that were being set on the battlefield. But how did that reporting affect what was being done back home? For the press of the United Kingdom, including that of Alfred Harmsworth, this meant reporting on the issues, even if the reporting caused some discussions and even tensions with the Parliament on its conduct towards the war effort. Some of these tensions were made possible through the reports made by various establishments of the news media, and of those who were leading them. The news media's contributions also played a role in the development of the country's propaganda machine, establishing a better understanding of their allies' sacrifices in the war and providing the foundations for a sweeping victory. While journalism during the Great War may have not necessarily taken place in the battlefield, its position on the war's overall history is worthy of consideration. Not only that, but these actions played a role in transforming how the United Kingdom responded to war conflicts and how the press reported on international affairs following the war. However, to evaluate the impact Harmsworth had on the British press would mean evaluating what had come before.

Throughout the eighteenth century, London's Fleet Street had established a reputation as the center for the country's press and a publishing powerhouse, with daily newspapers establishing their headquarters there. Providing a general idea of what was common at the time, critic Sydney Brooks appraised in 1915 on what was the typical format for a newspaper in Great Britain during the twentieth century:

“Up till [the twentieth century], a certain ponderosity had been the hall-mark of most British newspapers. They were extremely respectable, weighty and dull. They had, one might have said, a temperamental distrust of liveliness as something dangerous and ensnaring. Verbatim reports of everything reportable, long winded and eminently sententious editorials, and stodgy columns of Parliamentary debates, filled their pages.

Occasionally some journal of unusual enterprise would send a special correspondent out to Persia or Afghanistan, would dive deeply into the profundities of European politics, would open a subscription-list for some semi-public object, or produce a new scheme of army reform. It was a decent Press and a well-informed Press. It was wealthy, pontifical, respected and "literary." But it had an extraordinarily limited range. From the everyday interests of normal men and women, it stood serenely apart. It made no effort to reach the mass of the people who had grown to maturity since the setting up of a national system of education. It was curiously out of touch with the commercial life of the country."¹

Between 1860 and 1910, what has been considered Britain's "golden age" in newspaper journalism developed. During the period, new publications and owners began to establish presence throughout the country. As this period continued on, one owner would become pivotal in not only the era of change but also in the conflict that was to come.

Alfred Harmsworth, also known as Lord Northcliffe, can be described as the British equivalent to American media tycoon, William Randolph Hearst. Like Hearst, Harmsworth habitually acquired failing newspapers to make a prosperous income. One such acquisition was his 1894 purchase of *The Evening News*, a paper that remained in the Harmsworth empire for the rest of its lifespan.² Two papers in Edinburgh, Scotland, saw a merger under Harmsworth, creating the *Edinburgh Daily Record* that same year. In addition to these acquisitions, Harmsworth also established new publications to his news empire. Among them was *The Daily Mail*, with its first printing on May 4, 1896 representing, in the words of Brooks, "a revolution... not merely in the metropolis [of London] but of the whole kingdom."³ For Harmsworth, *The Daily Mail* only represented part of a foundation for his empire, as another acquisition would prove pivotal.

In 1908, Harmsworth added *The Times* to his empire's holdings. The newspaper was regarded by the country's elite as an important source of political news and opinions and was a source of official information for leaders outside of Britain. Harmsworth's acquisition of *The Times*, to the chagrin of his critics, meant his empire had "a key organ of the British establishment" in its possession.⁴ The combined empire may have been referred to by the public as "the Northcliffe press,"⁵ but how it spread around the country showed a compelling argument. Two years following *The Times'* acquisition, an estimate of all newspapers in Britain showed a combined daily circulation of two million papers under Harmsworth's ownership.⁶ Whether the public may have liked it or not, Harmsworth's empire had a sizeable control over the country's news efforts. As a further demonstration of Harmsworth's control over the national press, his papers in 1914 had amassed forty percent of the country's morning circulation, forty-five percent of the evening circulation, and fifteen percent of the Sunday circulation.⁷ In a time before

¹ Brooks, Sydney. "Lord Northcliffe and the War." *The North American Review*, Vol. 202, No. 717 (August 1915), 185.

² Simms, Richard. "History of The Evening News."

³ Brooks, 185.

⁴ J. Lee Thompson, "Fleet Street Colossus: The Rise and Fall of Northcliffe, 1896-1922." *Parliamentary History*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2006), 116.

⁵ Brooks, 190.

⁶ McEwen, John M. "The National Press during the First World War: Ownership and Circulation." *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (July 1982), 466.

⁷ Thompson, 115.

television or even radio, these numbers proved noteworthy as nothing like it has been experienced since that time.⁸

Through his stakes in various publications, the national press was largely under Harmsworth's ownership by the time of the Great War, and the support he attained would become beneficial in the conflicts he later endured. In a change of pace, however, Harmsworth sold off another of his home-grown newspapers, *The Daily Mirror*, to his brother Harold in 1914.⁹ Historian John McEwen believed that at the time, Harmsworth became more interested in "controlling the wave" of the support he had garnered over the years, believing that his support rivaled that of some government officials, including David Lloyd George.¹⁰ This support would be put to the test in the Great War that was embroiling that year throughout Europe.

In 1898, Frank Taylor wrote in a pamphlet that the press was becoming "a watch-dog for the State. Its mere existence is a guarantee against a recrudescence of abuses."¹¹ Taylor's words became reality during the Great War, as one element in war planning transformed into a tense moment between the media and the government. In planning for their involvement in the Great War, the British military's strategic plans favored the use of shrapnel weapons. What strategists did not realize was that decision gave artillery shells less of an advantage on the battlefield, with firing rates over long periods being underestimated. This crucial detail may have led to the shortage of artillery shells in early 1915, made public by Sir John French to *The Times*. On March 27, 1915, French, who was the British Commander-in-Chief Field Marshal, talked with the *The Times*. At one point, he made a call for more ammunition on the battlefield.¹²

French's call to the government provided an opportunity for Harmsworth to attack personally those in charge, as his nephew was among those killed in action. Among those targets was Secretary of State for War, Herbert Kitchener, who Harmsworth believed was responsible for putting one of his family to the grave. In an article of *The Times* dated April 7, 1915, Harmsworth suggested that there had been an "extraordinary failure of the Government to take in hand in business-like fashion the provision of full and adequate supply of munitions".¹³

In a speech to Newcastle on April 20, 1915, Prime Minister H. H. Asquith downplayed the concerns poised by Harmsworth and his publications, assuring that the military had enough ammunition on the battlefield. However, Asquith's statement later did not mean action was being done to alleviate the issue. Following the defeat in the Battle of Aubers Ridge on May 9, 1915, Colonel Charles Repington reported to *The Times*, where he was their war correspondent, that there was still a lack of artillery shells on the battlefield. Almost a week later, Repington's account made the paper's headline, "Need for shells: British attacks checked: Limited supply the cause: A Lesson from France."¹⁴ An article from *The Daily Mail*, dated May 21, 1915, further cemented Harmsworth's opposition towards Secretary Kitchener, with the title: "The Shells Scandal: Lord

⁸ David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989), 233.

⁹ McEwen, 467.

¹⁰ McEwen, J. M. "Northcliffe and Lloyd George at War, 1914-1918." *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (September 1981), 653.

¹¹ Hampton, Mark. "Liberalism, the Press, and the Construction of the Public Sphere: Theories of the Press in Britain, 1830-1914." *Victorian Periodicals Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Spring 2004), 80.

¹² Richard Holmes, *The Little Field Marshal: A Life of Sir John French* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2004), 287.

¹³ Ian F. W. Beckett, "The Man and the Hour: Lloyd George's Appointment as Minister of Munitions, 26 May 1915," in *The Making of the First War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 68

¹⁴ Holmes, 287-289.

Kitchener's Tragic Blunder. Our Terrible Casualty Lists." By informing the public about the loss of soldiers' lives due to the artillery shell shortage, Harmsworth was advocating for change to happen.¹⁵

However, the change Harmsworth tried to enforce did not rule in his favor, as Secretary Kitchener's position stood firm. Kitchener's inflexibility meant a more fervent response from the Secretary, and in turn, protests against Harmsworth's papers. One protest saw copies of *The Daily Mail* being burned in front of the Stock Exchange, while another saw subscriptions of Harmsworth's papers being canceled by the minute. These protests showcased the public's empathy for Secretary Kitchener and a reversal of opinion towards Harmsworth. David Lloyd George informed Harmsworth of these developments, in a way of telling the paper mogul the error in his expectations.¹⁶ While Harmsworth's attacks on Kitchener had turned against the press mogul, there was some attention brought onto the shell crisis, attention that would result in changes for the Asquith administration.

In the time between Colonel Repington's account and Harmsworth's article, changes were happening within the British government. On May 15, 1915, John Fisher resigned from his post as First Sea Lord due to differences with First Lord Winston Churchill over another war campaign. For the Asquith administration, the timing of Fisher's resignation proved devastating as a meeting with opposition leaders two days later would result in Asquith forcefully requesting that his ministers resign from their posts. As a result, Asquith essentially created a new coalition government.¹⁷ Among Asquith's new appointees was David Lloyd George as the Minister of Munitions, who would become vital in the months ahead.

On July 2, 1915, the Munitions of Wars Act of 1915 was passed, providing the new Asquith administration's response to the munition's crisis. Through the act, the British forces Asquith was responsible for would begin to receive a constant supply of munitions. The constant supply was made possible by increasing the output of munitions and incorporating private companies into the war effort under Lloyd George's Ministry of Munitions. In his book, *Modern England, 1885-1945: A History of My Own Times*, Parliament Conservative member J. A. R. Marriott goes into detail about the act:

"No private interest was to be permitted to obstruct the service, or imperil the safety, of the State. Trade Union regulations must be suspended; employers' profits must be limited, skilled men must fight, if not in the trenches, in the factories; manpower must be economized by the dilution of labour and the employment of women; Private factories must pass under the control of the State, and new national factories be set up. Results justified the new policy: the output was prodigious; the goods were at last delivered."¹⁸

Throughout the Great War, Germany utilized a propaganda machine that spread their explanations for going to battle to an international audience. For Great Britain, this represented a critical hurdle to tackle. In response, the country initiated a concert of organizations and efforts that formed their own propaganda machine.

In the end of August 1914, David Lloyd George urged Parliament to consider "an organization to inform and influence public opinion abroad and to confute German mis-statements

¹⁵ Beckett, 68.

¹⁶ Holmes, 288-289.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 288.

¹⁸ J. A. R. Marriott, *Modern England, 1885-1945: A History of My Own Times* (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1960), 376.

and [fallacy].”¹⁹ Cabinet member C.F.G. Masterman responded to Lloyd George’s call by proposing an in-house propaganda machine, believing that Germany’s showcased “an admirable object lesson in how not to do it” and that Britain’s own efforts could dismantle their shortcomings.²⁰ Shortly after its establishment in September 1914, Masterman’s Wellington House represented the centerpiece for Britain’s propaganda machine, located within a set of flats at Buckingham Gate. What was happening within these flats were shrouded in secrecy, guarded from the public and even Parliament. Wellington House utilized a country-based structure, separating content between individual “national sections” for countries like Scandinavia and Portugal. The United States, on the other hand, was placed in the position of “a most important special branch.”²¹

Though originally independent from the Foreign Office, Wellington House would soon be reorganized to be included in Spring 1916.²² By this time, operations were separated into three sections: one located around Fleet Street and the Foreign Office, one at the Foreign Office, and one at Buckingham Gate. The first location specialized in both cable and wireless transmissions, filmed propaganda, as well as handling press articles. The Foreign Office location acted as the new headquarters, focusing on the former national sections as well as a section dealing with enemy propaganda. And the Buckingham Gate location oversaw written and visual propaganda, particularly pictorial propaganda, and visually created propaganda art. These new changes were approved by the War Cabinet in February 1917, under the roof of the Ministry of Blockade and to be named as the Department of Information.²³

Despite the large-scale effort from the Foreign Office, it was not the only propaganda endeavor made by the country. On May 30, 1917, Alfred Harmsworth, in what was described by historian J. Lee Thompson as a “hastily called evening meeting,” contradicted his principles by accepting an offer from Prime Minister David Lloyd George and the War Cabinet. The offer required Harmsworth to act as the chairman of the British War Mission, wherein he would travel to the United States for the sake of strengthening British publicity and to better understand their new ally in the international conflict.²⁴ Through twenty previous trips to the States since 1894, Harmsworth had attained an understanding of American culture that rivaled few in his native land.²⁵

Through Harmsworth’s actions during the munition’s crisis of 1915, Parliament was well aware of any potential issues the press mogul could make in the States. There was also concern that keeping secrets from the Americans now seemed impossible, as they were now joining the war effort. There was consideration about whether Harmsworth would be able to “run amok” in the United States, American diplomat Edward House and British intelligence officer William

¹⁹ M.L. Sanders, “Wellington House and British Propaganda during the First World War.” *The Historical Journal* 18, No. 1 (1975), 119.

²⁰ Mark Wollaeger, “Impressionism and Propaganda: Ford’s Wellington House Books and the Good Soldier,” in *Modernism, Media, and Propaganda: British Narrative from 1900 to 1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 130.

²¹ Sanders, 120.

²² *Ibid.*, 122.

²³ *Ibid.*, 124.

²⁴ J. Lee Thompson, “‘To Tell the People of America the Truth’: Lord Northcliffe in the USA, Unofficial British Propaganda, June-November 1917.” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (April 1999): 243.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 245.

Wiseman concluded that people who would keep the chairman on the straight and narrow would accompany him on his travels.²⁶

Between June and November 1917, Harmsworth would travel across the continental United States, speaking at every stop that he would visit, whether it was in private gatherings or public venues. One such stop at the Washington Press Club in early July had him discussing censorship and espionage, although the exact comments he made on those subjects were not reproduced for the press, for the sake of preventing any misconceptions about what was said. On July 21, 1917, Harmsworth spoke to fourteen thousand people at Madison Square Garden, where he received a favorable reception, including a notice from *The New York Times*' Alexander Humphries. In his notice, Humphries stated that he wished that someone like Harmsworth was present in the United States' affairs.²⁷

During Harmsworth's endeavors in the United States, some of the Americans he spoke with encouraged him to focus on the Midwest region. Harmsworth would go on to address this to Walter Hines Page, Britain's American ambassador, in July by stating that "the Middle West and the West feel neglected by England, and they are neglected."²⁸ In the Midwest, the population had a significant German-American population. For the British, to ignore the Midwest region entirely would mean ignoring an aggressive population that held regard for the German cause, and therefore help strengthen that sympathy. Efforts in arranging Lloyd George, or some other British official, in accompanying Harmsworth to the Midwest were met with no success. Finding no other option available, Harmsworth ultimately decided to go to the Midwest on his own.

Harmsworth's first address to the Midwest audience was conducted on October 22, 1917 at the Cleveland Armory. There, he advocated for the continued support of Liberty Bonds, bonds that were being sold in the States during the conflict. In mentioning the strengthening power of the German forces, Harmsworth also advocated for strengthened shipbuilding in the United States. By referring to the city's recent win at the World Series, Harmsworth used the win as a demonstration of the city's continued strength. Two days later, Harmsworth would repeat these points during an address at the Chicago Association of Commerce meeting, where he was the guest of honor. The next day, the *Chicago Herald* provided praise for Harmsworth's contribution to the war discussion in the United States:

"[Harmsworth] knows. For over two years in England he led the fight against the murderous inertia of red tape and the suicidal policy of 'wait and see'... He has seen with his own eyes the red reckoning of the war... Probably no other man in this country today knows so well the necessities of his nation ... necessities to be supplied by America or not at all. We can accept his statements ... as facts and his conclusions as sound."²⁹

Praises like the one from the *Chicago Herald* were not uncommon during Harmsworth's visit to the Midwest. Newspapers in Kansas City praised Harmsworth's frankness in stating that the threat from Germany was a serious one, tearing away any doubts from the public. The acclaim would not go unnoticed by Harmsworth, mentioning it during an address to the St. Louis Chamber of Commerce meeting on October 26, 1917. During an appearance in Dayton, Ohio, before November 3, 1917, Harmsworth presented Orville Wright with a medal recognizing the latter's aviation accomplishments.³⁰ While he thought that his efforts were not enough, Harmsworth

²⁶ Thompson, "To Tell the People of America the Truth", 247.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 254.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 256.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 259.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 260.

would continue to receive praise for his addresses. Edward Hurley, the chairman of the United States Shipping Board, wrote to Harmsworth that the American population did not fully realize the gravity of the conflict until he presented it to them. Writer Mary Roberts Rinehart believed that Harmsworth's spirit and value in his presence during the American tours were "[enormous]."³¹

Upon his return to the United Kingdom on November 12, 1917, Harmsworth's position as chairman of the British War Mission would not last much longer. In February 1918, his post would be taken over by Rufus Issacs, also known as the Marquess of Reading, who would continue to lead the movements established by Harmsworth in the United States. Through Harmsworth's efforts, the American government received a better understanding of the conflict they entered, including what knowledge the British had gathered of the conflict thus far. And for the first time, the traditionally inflexible Harmsworth had a sense of accountability – Thompson noted that for the press mogul, the five-month task was "the most important task of his life."³² Through the efforts of Wellington House, the Foreign Office, and Alfred Harmsworth, the British had developed a viable propaganda machine that endured through the remainder of the war. Wellington House was able to gather a better understanding of the public about why their country's involvement on the battlefield mattered. And through Harmsworth, the British were able to communicate their message to the Americans, illustrating them on the gravity of the conflict.

With the Great War, journalism in the United Kingdom had elevated to the point of making direct change possible in the country's government. Alfred Harmsworth used his empire to influence the public's opinion on war matters – sometimes to his benefit, and other times not so much. In a demonstration of his the press' ability to influence change on the battlefield over governmental affairs, personal attacks also brought attention to munition shortages. The government's efforts in creating a propaganda machine allowed for a countermeasure against the enemy's own, thanks to the work of Wellington House and the Foreign Office. And Harmsworth's efforts in the United States allowed for an American audience to realize the magnitude of the situation they were intervening in. While the press in the United Kingdom would reach heights that were never attained again, these actions shaped the future of international journalism.

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³¹ Thompson, "To Tell the People of America the Truth", 261.

³² *Ibid.*, 262.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest

Charlie Charrier declares no conflict of interest in this article.

Human and Animal Rights and Informed Consent

No human or animal tests were conducted for this article.

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