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Edited by
Martin Conboy
Adrian Bingh

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Volume 3

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Chapter Twenty-One

BRITAIN'S IMPERIAL PRESS SYSTEM

Simon J. Potter

Introduction

MOST HISTORIES OF the British press are decidedly insular, and some do not even venture beyond the borders of England. This is both unfortunate and misleading. It should be a truism that the history of the newspaper press is, in large part, transnational. Certainly, newspapers have played a significant role serving economic, political, social and cultural requirements, both local and national. Yet newspapers have also acted as one of the most important interfaces between Britain and a wider world. From the earliest days of their existence, newspapers brought news, opinion and commercial information from overseas. During the nineteenth century, and for much of the twentieth century, they were arguably the single most important means by which ordinary people could comprehend and imagine the world beyond Britain's shores.

The idea that newspapers created national 'imagined communities' has offered many historians a useful shorthand in their attempts to explain how the press helped transform the nature and scale of modern societies (Anderson 1991). However, like all such concepts, it is inevitably a radical simplification. Not only does it ignore the fundamental role played by the press in sustaining other forms of identity (including those based on locality, religion, class and gender), but it also fails to encompass the function of the press as a transnational connector (on transnational connectors see Saunier 2013: 57). The modern press has simultaneously acted as a part of, and a facilitator for, larger worldwide flows of goods, ideas and people. Newspapers developed in the seventeenth century to serve the interests of commerce and finance: from

an early stage, such interests were transnational, as well as national, in nature (Parsons 1989: 18). Print capitalism was subsequently driven by the inexorable logic of the market to seek ever-wider opportunities for commercial expansion beyond Britain's shores.

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the British press created myriad connections with the United States and Europe. Arguably, these places provided the news that most interested British newspaper readers (on links with the US see Wiener and Hampton 2007; Wiener 2011). However, the press also played a key role in connecting Britain with its empire overseas. Imperial readerships, business relationships, and communication links helped shape the commercial and institutional development of British newspapers and periodicals (Potter 2003; Potter 2017). These connections also influenced the news and other content printed by British newspapers and helped create an imagined imperial sense of community. For contemporaries, there was not necessarily a contradiction between the national and imperial functions of the press. As *The Times* commented in 1930:

> The newspaper Press is possibly the most vital working part of the twin-geared driving machinery of the Empire. It is the means on which each country has relied for the nurture of distinctive nationhood. Simultaneously it is the means by which each country is enabled to visualize itself as a unit in an otherwise incomprehensible world-order. The Press is the chief instrument which has vitalized nationality and vitalized the Commonwealth and daily preserves and increases the vitality of both.[1]

The press was thus seen, by some, as essential to the functioning of empire, helping to build and reconcile national and imperial identities. Yet this was of course only one side of the story. Newspapers also offered anti-colonial nationalists a powerful means to subvert imperial authority, and colonial and imperial officials sought in response to turn the press to their own ends (Kaul 2003). As a result, the contradictions between ideas about liberty and the freedom of the press on one hand, and autocratic colonial rule on the other, became increasingly apparent.

Institutionally and commercially, British newspapers and news agencies came to occupy a position at the centre of what was, by the beginning of the twentieth century, a vast imperial press system. This system also encompassed the colonial press, a counterpart and offshoot of the British press industry, which had been created by the development of settler, expatriate and indigenous newspapers in Britain's colonies. Often based on British models, colonial newspapers played a key

role as products, and facilitators, of British overseas expansion. Locally produced newspapers and periodicals helped build the colonial economies that yielded food and raw materials for export, and thus sustained the imperial relationship. Their boosterism was vital to maintaining the colonial 'progress industry', attracting migrants and capital to the colonies from Britain and elsewhere (Belich 2009: 185–92). Locally produced newspapers were also crucial to the life of colonial towns and cities, the creation of structures of colonial governance and self-rule, and the maintenance of imperial trade networks. These papers served local colonial, as well as imperial, interests: the export of British ideas about the role of a free press, for example, played a key role in allowing white settlers to challenge and break the authority of colonial governors appointed in London, the better to appropriate land and labour from indigenous peoples (Botha 1984; Bonwick 1890).

British and colonial newspapers were linked together in numerous ways. Journalists could follow the frontier of opportunity and enjoy imperial careers, as they moved around the empire seeking work. Models of journalistic practice often travelled with them (Potter 2003: 16–27). By the early twentieth century, professional and industry bodies such as the Empire Press Union (see case study below) provided a forum for joint discussion among and action by journalists and newspaper proprietors across the empire. Most importantly, huge volumes of news flowed from place to place, within (although also across) the boundaries of the imperial press system.

These flows and connections were largely the product of commercial interest and voluntary co-operation, rather than state intervention or direction. Newspapers traded news with one another (or pirated it) as a cheap and effective means to cover world affairs. Private enterprise established shipping lines that carried vast quantities of newspapers in the mails, and built a system of telegraph lines and undersea telegraph cables that transmitted news around the world. News agencies profited by establishing syndicated news services, building on the possibilities of electrical telegraphy. However, it would be wrong to see the imperial press system purely as the product of unrestricted free enterprise, even if the self-mythologising of the newspaper industry might encourage this belief. Shipping companies, telegraph and cable companies, newspapers, and news agencies often sought to establish monopolies and restrictive practices in order to increase and protect their revenues. Moreover, such organisations were often willing, and sometimes eager, to accept state subsidies or other forms of government assistance to strengthen their operations (Silberstein-Loeb 2014). Thinking about the transnational and imperial aspects of press history helps us to see how in reality, despite the industry's prevalent rhetoric of a Fourth Estate holding the government to account, private enterprise and state intervention often went hand in hand.

Reuters provides perhaps the best example of how this dialectic shaped the creation, and disintegration, of Britain's imperial press system. For over a century, Reuters was the pre-eminent British international news agency. It provided newspapers in Britain and across the empire with much of their international news, occupying a key niche in the empire's press industry. Yet it was also an important tool of British geopolitical interests, and accordingly developed a close relationship with the state. The analysis that follows examines what the case of Reuters can tell us about how the links between empire, private enterprise and state intervention shaped the development of the British press.

The Imperial Press System

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the British press sat at the centre of a world-spanning imperial press system. In print, a significant volume of British newspapers continued to be distributed to readers around the empire by mail, and many colonial newspapers made their way to Britain that way too. Not only were print newspapers read overseas, but they continued to be mined for news by editors, following the time-honoured practice of clipping articles and reprinting them, often without permission or acknowledgement. Meanwhile, correspondents around the world sent letters to editors in London, and London correspondents mailed despatches to newspapers in the colonies. A great deal of news thus continued to be provided as hard copy, slow to arrive even with the spread of railways and steamship routes around the empire, but relatively cheap to procure, and offering detailed coverage of a wide range of affairs (Potter 2004).

During the second half of the nineteenth century, these connections had been supplemented, and in some cases superseded, by news carried over the empire's growing system of overland electric telegraphs and undersea telegraph cables. This made possible the near-instantaneous transmission of news across vast distances. Individual newspapers, in Britain and the colonies, certainly made use of the new telegraph cables. However, the cost of doing so was often prohibitively expensive. It was Reuter's Telegram Company, universally known as Reuters, that was first to exploit the resultant niche in the market for a syndicated service of cable news. Reports could be gathered by a single agency and sold to multiple subscribers, in Britain and overseas, sharing the costs

Figure 21.1 General Post Central Telegraph Office, London, c. 1898

while generating a profit for the agency. International news agencies were among the world's first transnational corporations (Boyd-Barrett and Rantanen 1998). Reuters capitalised on London's position as the hub of the largely British-financed and British-owned international cable system. It set up offices in successive colonial centres as they were connected with London, allowing it to feed news (and, more profitably, financial and commercial information) back and forth between imperial 'core' and colonial 'periphery'. Reuters emerged as the 'news agency of the British empire': other British news agencies generally occupied a subordinate position and, crucially, only served newspapers in the UK itself. For Reuters, Egypt and India proved important bridgeheads, allowing further expansion into the Far East, Australasia and southern Africa. In India Reuters enjoyed a profitable, dominant market position; elsewhere, it often had to make compromises with local news agencies, which sought to control international news supplies in pursuit of their own business interests (Read 1999: 61–5, 87–90, 176, quote at 1). The less prosperous parts of the empire, notably in Africa, meanwhile tended to be poorly connected to the submarine cable network, and were thus not fully integrated into the imperial press system

Reuters' desire to profit from state support was apparent during this early period. In many places, colonial governments offered Reuters subsidies that played an important part in its expansion, and which placed it in close relationships with civil servants and politicians,

leading some to question its independence. An 'underlying patriotism' meant that while Reuters claimed to provide true, accurate, non-partisan news, it was generally regarded in official circles as a reliable supporter of British interests overseas. The agency maintained close contact with the Foreign Office, and from 1911 was directly subsidised by the British government to distribute official reports and speeches as part of its service to subscribers (Read 1999: 65–8, 90–5, quote at 67).

Reuters' position was also strengthened by its participation in the so-called 'international news ring'. This was an oligopolistic arrangement with two other news agencies, Havas (based in France) and Wolff (based in Germany). Together, in an agreement signed in 1870 that endured for more than sixty years, they divided up the world market for syndicated news (the US Associated Press, the AP, joined the cartel in 1893): Reuters sold and gathered its news in the British empire, China and Japan; Havas controlled Western Europe, French colonial Africa and South America; and Wolff staked its claim to Central and Eastern Europe and Scandinavia. The agencies exchanged news among themselves, to provide global coverage, but agreed to refrain from selling news direct to subscribers in each other's territory (Read 1999: 57, 86). Together with the formidable influence of the large London newspapers, and of the world of international financial services focused in the City of London, this arrangement further strengthened the information gathering and distributing role of the British capital, making London the news hub of the British empire, and indeed to some extent of the globe.

The First World War posed significant challenges for transnational businesses such as Reuters, which relied on the flow of information across borders and on news-exchange arrangements with agencies based in countries which were now counted among Britain's enemies. By 1914 Reuters was already encountering serious financial problems, and a wartime ban on the sending of coded messages made the situation worse. The British government was concerned by the fragile state of the agency, and by the prospect of foreign ownership or influence. When Baron Herbert de Reuter, the company's managing director, committed suicide, Roderick Jones, the company's general manager in South Africa, was appointed to run the company. Jones arranged for the existing shareholders to be bought out, using a loan guaranteed by the British government. In his official history of Reuters, Donald Read showed how, in the process, the government secretly secured the ability in 1916 (through a single 'public policy share') to nominate a Reuters director with powers to veto the appointment of any other director. These powers were retained, probably unused, until 1919. Reuters meanwhile distributed a large 'Agence-Reuter' news service

Figure 21.2 Roderick Jones, Managing Director of Reuters 1916–41

to subscribers across Europe, the Middle East, the Far East and the British empire, and a smaller 'Official Service', both paid for by the British government. Although aspects of Reuters' propaganda role were obvious to contemporaries, the details of the government's wartime powers were largely kept secret (Read 1999: 119–22).

There has been some debate among historians concerning the exact nature of Reuters' relationship with the state. As official historian, Read tactfully posed the question of how far the arrangement compromised the agency's independence, without explicitly answering it (Read 1999: 133). Peter Putnis subsequently argued that the state sought actively to secure a measure of control over Reuters and its news services, and that the new arrangement amounted to 'effective British government control' of the agency. The deal satisfied both Reuters' need for income and the patriotism of its directors, and opened the tap for the subsidies mentioned above. It allowed the state to review Reuters' links with foreign news agencies and to intervene in the agency's affairs if necessary (Putnis 2008: quote at 141). Taking a different view, Jonathan Silberstein-Loeb presented the 1916 deal as driven not primarily by the requirements of the British state, but instead as a canny masterstroke executed by Jones that rescued Reuters from its financial woes. According to this interpretation, Reuters remained in control of its

destiny, and used the state to secure its own business interests: Jones 'pulled [the Foreign Office] around by the nose to fulfil his strategic ends' (Silberstein-Loeb 2010: quote at 288). Yet as Putnis subsequently argued (and had indeed suggested in his original article), these two drives – Reuters' search for profit and market dominance on the one hand, and the British state's desire to secure a means to influence Reuters and its news as and when required on the other – were not mutually exclusive (Putnis 2010). Examining the relationship between Reuters and the state in the 1930s reinforces Putnis's claims. During debates about government support for Reuters in this later period, the Foreign Office was fully aware of Jones's desire to protect his company's (and his own) financial interests, arguably at the expense of the taxpayer and of other news agencies in the empire. Civil servants were anxious to ensure that the government, rather than Reuters, remained in the saddle.

Reuters, the Foreign Office and the Challenges of the 1930s

In many ways, during the 1920s Britain and France attempted to restore the pre-war global order in modified form. They had some success in this quest until the onset of the Great Depression (Boyce 2009). As a result, geopolitical challenges to Britain's world role, on the surface at least, seemed manageable. This was reflected in the domain of global news flows, and in the roles of Reuters and the British state in shaping those flows.

As noted above, with the end of the war, the mechanism which allowed for direct government influence over Reuters was abolished. Nevertheless, Reuters continued to receive state subsidies in return for sending official news on request, while loudly proclaiming its independence (Read 1999: 158). To disseminate news abroad, the Foreign Office News Department also maintained the British Official Wireless (BOW) service, which had been established during the war (Taylor 1981: 57–64). BOW served the overseas press (later also broadcasters) with news from Britain 'of a political, commercial and general character', which could be re-used without payment for copyright. BOW was distributed mainly by wireless telegraphy and, reportedly, was widely used.[2] Reuters viewed all this as poaching on its own preserves, and lobbied throughout the interwar period to take over and run the service in return for a subsidy.[3]

During the 1920s challenges to Reuters' commercial position overseas were generally met successfully. The monopolistic structures that had previously shaped the flow of news emerged from the First World

Figure 21.3 Wellington General Post Office foyer with a telegraph sign visible at the back, c. 1920s (Courtesy of Archives New Zealand)

War largely intact; the international news ring arrangement was modified to reflect new geopolitical realities, with Reuters and Havas taking control of Wolff's territories (Read 1999: 169–72). At home, Jones strengthened the agency's financial underpinnings by arranging for the sale in 1926 of a majority of its shares to the Press Association (PA), the organisation representing the British and Irish provincial press, and one of Reuters' principal customers. Reuters also adapted to the advent of radio, distributing an increasing proportion of its news to subscribers using wireless telegraphy instead of cables, and signing news supply agreements with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and broadcasters overseas to bring in additional revenue and prevent the emergence of new sources of competition.[4]

However, during the 1930s the outlook for Britain's imperial press system, and for Reuters, deteriorated significantly. The underlying weaknesses of Britain's changed geopolitical situation were revealed by the Great Depression and the intensification of foreign challenges to the international status quo, most notably from the fascist powers. Reflecting this growing instability, during the early 1930s the international news ring began to break down under pressure from the American AP (Rantanen 1998: 35). In 1930 the AP served notice of withdrawal from the news ring, and its subsequent determination to drive Reuters out of Japan triggered an escalating conflict between the two agencies which, in February 1934, resulted in a humiliating climb-down by Jones: a new agreement even allowed the AP to sell its news direct to the British PA rather than via the intermediary of Reuters

(Read 1999: 180–3; Cooper 1969: 203–63). Reuters also faced serious competition in overseas news markets from French, German, Italian and Japanese news agencies. Large subsidies from their respective national governments meant that these agencies could supply their services to newspapers and broadcasters in foreign markets at much lower rates than Reuters (Read 1999: 192–8; Taylor 1981: 208–11).

During the 1930s it became clear that the old imperial press system, focused on the territories of the British empire, and with a great monopolistic private company dominating the distribution of news, no longer served British interests. The key challenges to British overseas influence came not in the 'formal' empire, but in a wide range of independent countries scattered across the globe. The threat was particularly acute in the so-called 'informal' empire, the territories on the margins on Britain's world-system – notably in the Far East and South America – that had in the past been subject to strong British diplomatic, economic and cultural influence (on informal empire see Gallagher and Robinson 1953; Lynn 1999). The forces that held these regions within Britain's orbit were weakening during the 1930s, as other powers – the fascist states, but also France and the USA – expanded their influence at Britain's expense.

By the end of 1936, Britain's dwindling presence in overseas news markets was causing alarm in official circles.[5] At the Foreign Office, civil servants emphasised how difficult it had become to secure 'an adequate presentation abroad of British news and more particularly of British views on international affairs'. However, they were not convinced that state subsidies to Reuters offered an effective remedy. This was partly due to Reuters news-exchange arrangements with other agencies, which meant that the agency was potentially recycling propaganda from hostile countries within its news services. It was also the sheer scale of Reuters' decline that made subsidisation seem pointless. In South America for example, where the Foreign Office deemed it imperative to strengthen British influence in the face of foreign propaganda activities, Reuters was largely excluded from the market for news by Havas and the US news agencies. Indeed, in many places the strength of competition from unsubsidised US news agencies seemed to pose a greater threat to Reuters than did state-subsidised foreign agencies. Meanwhile, outside of South Africa and India, Reuters seemed to be losing control even of empire news markets. The Foreign Office thus argued against subsidising Reuters, and insisted that if a subsidy was granted, then the government would need to secure 'some measure of control over the character of the news' distributed by the agency.[6]

In November 1937, Jones submitted a request for a hefty, disguised state subsidy in the form of reduced rates for wireless transmission of news from General Post Office (GPO) transmitters, to allow an expansion in the volume of news distributed by Reuters. Jones highlighted the threat posed by state-subsidised foreign competitors, and the 'undesirable consequences, especially during any period of international tension, of having British political news, British public opinion, and British newspaper comment, presented to foreigners, not by a British organisation but as seen through German, French, Italian, and Japanese eyes'.[7] Jones assured the GPO that if it provided the requested concessions, Reuters would exclude news provided by foreign agencies, and only distribute reports provided by its own correspondents.[8] However, the Foreign Office argued that rather than seeking to support British interests, Reuters in fact wished to use subsidised news to establish a monopoly position for itself in the empire. By flooding empire markets with cheap news, Reuters could drive local news agencies out of business and establish its own dominance. The Foreign Office therefore repeated its argument that if a subsidy was granted, 'a much tighter form of control [over Reuters] would be necessary' to prevent such an outcome.[9]

Over the course of 1938, the position of Reuters in the Far East continued to deteriorate. Edged out of Japan, the agency was also increasingly excluded from China as the Japanese occupation expanded and intensified.[10] By July 1938 the British government had provisionally agreed to make an annual payment of around £39,500 to Reuters 'with the object of providing Governments and the public overseas with an accurate and impartial service of news, especially on topics or events in which British interests are concerned'. In return, the government insisted that:

> Reuters will at all times maintain the closest co-operation and liaison with the Foreign Office and other Government Departments at home and through their agents overseas with British missions and official representatives overseas. While maintaining complete independence of direction or control by H. M. Government they will at all times bear in mind any suggestions made to them on behalf of the Government as to the development or orientation of their news service or as to the topics or events which from time to time may require particular attendance.[11]

This was a peculiar notion of 'complete independence', to say the least, and concerns about whether such an arrangement could be kept secret preventing a final agreement being reached.[12]

It was the Munich Crisis that finally prompted the government to act, and in September 1938 it was agreed that for the duration of the emergency, the state would provide the pro rata equivalent of £12,000 p.a. In return, Reuters would send an additional 2,000 words daily to its foreign subscribers, tripling the size of these services.[13] However, the Foreign Office resisted requests from Reuters that this arrangement should be made permanent.[14] It also refused to comply with Reuters' demands that it hand over the running of the BOW to the news agency, and pay Reuters for handling the service. Civil servants argued that such a move would give Reuters even greater monopoly powers, while also possibly resulting in a 'substantial loss of British publicity'. After the Munich Crisis had passed, the government discontinued the subsidy to Reuters for providing subscribers outside Europe with additional news (although subsidies for the service to Europe continued).[15] The Foreign Office also suggested the formation of a non-commercial 'British News Corporation', similar in nature to the BBC, to manage both incoming and outgoing news. This would have entailed a merger of all British news agencies, and financial support from the state, meeting the threat of foreign competition without creating a private monopoly.[16] Reuters continued to press its case for subsidisation, and the Foreign Office continued to resist, until the outbreak of the Second World War.[17] As in 1916, the relationship between Reuters and the British government was the product of the interaction of their respective interests. In the 1930s, these interests did not coincide, and Reuters was certainly not able to lead the state in whatever direction in pleased.

Case Study – The Empire Press Union

The case of Reuters illustrated how empire, geopolitics, private enterprise and state intervention combined to shape the press industry. A further example, which sheds additional light upon the structural and institutional impact of empire on the British press, and which also helps reveal some of the further paradoxes of press freedom and state intervention, is the Empire Press Union (EPU, later renamed the Commonwealth Press Union).

The EPU was one of the key institutions which helped bind the newspaper industry in Britain and its empire together during the twentieth century. It was founded in the immediate aftermath of the Imperial Press Conference of 1909, which had brought delegates from around the empire to meet with their counterparts in Britain and discuss matters of common concern. With sections in the dominions and colonies, and a head office in London, the EPU presented itself as the protector of the collective interests of the empire's newspapers, newspaper proprietors and journalists. Most of the delegates who attended

the early conferences held by the EPU were white, and were also generally people who saw themselves as members of a world-spanning 'British' community. There was only one non-white delegate at the first conference, though participation by non-whites did slowly increase over the decades that followed (Potter 2003: 132–59, 205–10). Indian engagement with the EPU became particularly significant, despite periodic tensions over issues including state censorship and press freedom: notably, the imperial press conferences came to provide 'a rare forum for Indian journalists to raise concerns and grievances on an international stage' (Kaul 2006: 139).

The EPU was particularly active in lobbying for reductions in press cable (and later wireless) telegraph rates, although in the wake of disagreements at the 1909 conference, care was taken to avoid measures that would fatally undermine existing cable news cartels. Campaigning was accompanied by a great deal of imperial rhetoric. It was argued that improved press communication would help bring about imperial unity, and that state intervention in, aid for, or even ownership of, the cable and wireless system was needed to secure this ambitious goal. Like the Foreign Office in its approach to Reuters, the British GPO was not always convinced as to the disinterestedness or validity of these requests for government assistance. Nevertheless, modest reductions in press cable rates were secured at the 1909 conference, and further concessions were obtained over the decades that followed (Potter 2003: 132–59). In April 1939, following a sustained campaign by the EPU, an empire-wide flat rate of 2¼ d per word for press telegrams came into operation.[18]

The EPU also worked in other ways to facilitate the work of newspapers, particularly those from the colonies and dominions. During the First World War, the EPU helped to coordinate the activities of dominion press correspondents in London (securing important facilities for them, in order to help cover the war effort), and also to distribute propaganda overseas. EPU lobbying for reduced press cable rates resumed after the war, and the principle of holding regular imperial press conferences was established to help secure this and other goals (Potter 2003: 191, 205–6). The EPU took great pains to ensure that broadcasting of news by the BBC's new Empire Service did not infringe on the commercial interests of its overseas members.[19] During the 1930s, the EPU co-ordinated activities on a wide range of other issues, including copyright, advertising practices, libel laws, newspaper postage rates, training for journalists and access to newsworthy events for dominion journalists in Britain.[20]

A proposal for a single imperial news organisation, amalgamating Reuters with other British and dominion news agencies and cartels, had been put forward at the 1909 Imperial Press Conference (Potter 2003: 140). This idea resurfaced in EPU discussions from 1930 onwards, with proposals for a single empire-wide 'co-operative news association', merging Reuters, the Press Association and other agencies. Canadian members were prominent among

those arguing for an extension of the co-operative principles that underpinned their own news agency, the Canadian Press Ltd. These proposals were considered at the Imperial Press Conferences of 1930 and 1935, and at the EPU's first annual conference in 1936, but 'little definite progress' was made, probably due to resistance by vested commercial interests.[21] As noted above, the idea of a 'British News Corporation' similarly beguiled the Foreign Office. The creation of the Reuters Trust after the Second World War went some way towards the realisation of this goal (see below).

During the latter part of the 1930s, the EPU became increasingly interested in preserving and championing press freedom, and in preventing the encroachment of censorship in the various parts of the empire. At its first Annual Conference, the EPU passed a resolution arguing for censorship only 'in times of grave emergency, or when racial or communal passions are aroused', and for minimal censorship even at such moments. The ideal was 'free co-operation between officials and [the] newspaper Press', to ensure that censorship operated in accordance with 'definite, reasonable and known rules' and was accompanied by prompt official statements about the events in question.[22] On the eve of war, the EPU also expressed its collective alarm at 'the number and gravity of the instances of encroachment by legislation and otherwise upon the freedom of the Press which have been reported to it from many parts of the Empire', and urged on its members 'the need for watchfulness lest restrictions which individually may not seem serious should cumulatively weaken the performance of essential duties'. The EPU proposed a collective, public, empire-wide response to any infringements of the freedom of the press, wherever in the empire they occurred.[23]

Considering the activities of the EPU as a whole during this period, it seems clear that state intervention was to be courted when it served the commercial interests of the press, accepted and carefully managed when mutually convenient, and resisted or rejected if it threatened the fundamental interests of newspaper enterprises. This pragmatic attitude was characteristic of wider press responses to government involvement in the business of selling news.

Decline

Reuters took a long time to rid itself of both its hunger for state subsidisation and its imperial role. During the Second World War, a close relationship was established with the Ministry of Information, the government's co-ordinating body for propaganda, and payment for the transmission of official news continued. By 1948 the ownership structure of Reuters seemed further to entrench its status as the news agency of the British empire. As the newly established Reuters Trust, it was jointly owned by the PA, the UK Newspaper Proprietors'

Association, the Australian Associated Press, the New Zealand Press Association and the Press Trust of India. It was not until the 1980s that Reuters moved decisively to sever its links with the British state, and to shift from its Commonwealth orientation to a more global business strategy (Read 1999: 291–437). The imperial press system proved surprisingly long-lived, despite the broader pattern of Britain's post-war retreat from empire.

Nevertheless, Britain's imperial press system clearly enjoyed its heyday during the first three decades of the twentieth century, and declined thereafter. It was during the early twentieth century that an interlocking set of cultural affinities, mutual interests and commercial (often monopolistic) arrangements worked to create an empire-spanning mechanism for the exchange of news, sustained by a complex set of competitive and collaborative relationships among myriad newspaper companies and news agencies. London became the empire's news hub. During the first half of the century, in the eyes of some at least, the press helped simultaneously to build, sustain and perhaps reconcile both national and imperial communities. This powerful machinery for disseminating information, ideas and opinion was successfully mobilised to support an imperial war effort during the First World War.

Just as much of the damage done to Britain's world-system by that war was not immediately apparent to contemporaries, so during the 1920s did the imperial press system seem to have emerged unscathed. Nevertheless, during the 1930s it became clear that Britain was losing ground in key foreign news markets, and that a structure oriented towards communication within the boundaries of the empire, dominated by a great private monopoly, was poorly adapted to meet new challenges to British influence overseas. As during the First World War, Reuters pressed the British government to provide subsidies that would bolster its profits and enable it to entrench its position in 'safe' empire news markets. However, the Foreign Office was keen to ensure that the state did not become the servant of a private monopoly. It repeatedly and successfully argued that there were better ways to transmit news from British sources to overseas audiences, and thus help secure British interests overseas, than to prop up Reuters.

In the decades that followed the Second World War, many of the institutional and commercial connections which linked together press enterprises around the empire – or what was increasingly referred to as the Commonwealth – continued to function. The post-war histories of Reuters and the Empire/Commonwealth Press Union underline this. Journalists meanwhile continued to move around the Commonwealth in search of employment overseas, news continued to flow and British

newspaper enterprises sought to establish business interests in other Commonwealth markets. Yet the press also played a key role in anti-colonial nationalist movements, a means by which political leaders could mobilise opinion in colonies, in Britain and internationally, against continued imperial rule. British newspapers meanwhile provided in-depth coverage of, and to some extent facilitated, Britain's retreat from empire (Coffey 2015). By the end of the century, the nature of the British newspaper industry was still clearly transnational, but few traces of its imperial past remained. The purchase of Reuters by the Thomson Corporation of Canada in 2008 had little to do with any sense of a Commonwealth connection.

Conclusion

As this chapter has demonstrated, the overseas influence exerted by Britain's news industry depended on a mixture of private enterprise, restrictive and monopolistic market practices, and state intervention. The press was willing, and sometimes eager, to accept state assistance in order to promote its commercial interests. Thinking about the imperial ramifications of the British news industry is important for historians of the British press, for it helps us to challenge some deeply ingrained assumptions about the freedom of the press from state intervention, and about the devotion of the press to the principle of free enterprise. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the British press certainly developed a strident rhetoric of commercial and political freedom. However, when we consider the issue of news supply, it becomes clear that newspapers and news agencies colluded and formed restrictive practices to protect the commercial interests of existing enterprises. Moreover, through intervening in and subsidising the operation of news agencies, the state could play a significant, although often hidden, role in the broader newspaper industry. Press historians should not treat news agencies as something essentially extraneous to newspaper history, to be left to those working in the field of communications studies. Rather, we should place them more centrally within our frame of analysis, and consider how doing so might reshape our understanding of the history of the British press.

Notes

1. 'The Empire Press', London *Times*, Empire Press Number, 31 May 1930.
2. UK National Archives (henceforth UKNA), CAB 32/84, 'E.E. (B) (30)

30 – Cabinet – Imperial Conference 1930 – News Services between the United Kingdom and the Dominions and India', August 1930.
3. UKNA, FO 395/578, 'Future of the British Official Wireless', 14 December 1938.
4. 'News by Cable and Wireless', London *Times*, Empire Press Number, 31 May 1930.
5. For the GPO's views see UKNA, FO 395/552, F. W. Phillips to Bowyer, 29 December 1936.
6. UKNA, FO 395/552, N. E. Nash to R. Leeper, 16 December 1936; Nash, memo, 5 March 1937; quotes from Nash, 'British News Abroad – Interdepartmental meeting at the Foreign Office, 28 October 1937', 2 November 1937.
7. UKNA, FO 395/576, 'Aide Memoire on News Services for the Right Honble. the Postmaster-General by Sir Roderick Jones', 23 November 1937.
8. UKNA, FO 395/576, memo of meeting between Jones and Postmaster General, 23 November 1937.
9. UKNA, FO 395/576, Nash to Leeper, 15 December 1937.
10. UKNA, FO 395/585, letter from British Embassy, Tokyo, 27 April 1938.
11. UKNA, FO 395/577, H. J. Wilson to Jones, 11 July 1938.
12. UKNA, FO 395/577, memo of meeting 15 July 1938.
13. UKNA, FO 395/577, minute re: expansion of Reuters service, 22 September 1938 and Phillips to E. N. R. Trentham, 26 July 1938.
14. UKNA, FO 395/577, minute by Nash, 28 October 1938.
15. UKNA, FO 395/578, minutes by Nash, 3 and 10 November 1938.
16. UKNA, FO 395/578, Leeper to Sir A. Barlow, 18 November 1938, and memo of meeting between Foreign Office and Treasury, 11 November 1938.
17. UKNA, FO 395/578, 'Reuter Wireless News Services – Copy of Letter dated 30 November 1938 to Sir Alan Barlow from Sir Roderick Jones', and Nash to Leeper, 7 December 1938.
18. Commonwealth Press Union Archive (henceforth CPUA), Senate House Library, London, ICS 121 2/2, *The Empire Press Union's News Letter*, April 1939.
19. CPUA, ICS 121B/4/1, minutes of EPU Council meeting, 4 November 1935.
20. See for example CPUA, ICS 121B/4/1, minutes of EPU Council meeting, 4 February 1936 and ICS 121 2/2, *Empire Press Union News Letter*, May 1935.
21. CPUA, ICS 121B/4/1, 'Minutes of a meeting held in pursuance of the following Resolution adopted by the Council of the Empire Press Union on January 14th. 1931'. ICS 121B/4/1, 'Proposal by Mr. J. F. B. Livesay, on behalf of the Canadian Press, for telegraphic interchange of background news by the Dominions news associations', c. January 1937.
22. CPUA, ICS 121 2/2, *The Empire Press Union's News Letter*, June 1936.
23. CPUA, ICS 121 2/2, *The Empire Press Union's News Letter*, July 1936.

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE ENTERTAINMENT PRESS

Patrick Glen

Introduction

Coleman joined the *Melody Maker* at their Fleet Street office in 1960, and at first found it hard to adjust to a different style of showbiz journalism. He couldn't see what was 'newsworthy' about a string of Cliff Richard tour dates and preferred to stir up a row with the BBC or research a heavily angled investigation into the music business. Feeling frustrated, he planned to defect to the *Daily Telegraph*. Then he encountered a classic put-down from a *Telegraph* executive at his job interview. Asked where he worked, he replied: 'The *Melody Maker*.' And before that? '*The Manchester Evening News*.' After a long pause, the executive inquired icily: 'Tell me, Mr Coleman, why did you leave journalism?'

THE ANECDOTE, TAKEN from Roy Coleman's obituary (*Independent*, 13 September 1996) reveals a common preconception about the entertainment press; it was a journalistic backwater, a place for fanatics and second-rate journalists, where publishers made easy money. The view misses the significance of a medium where the entertainment industry and the public came together to discuss the creative practices, performances and commercial products of artistes. These journalistic and publishing practices were not performed in isolation; the entertainment press, often implicitly but also knowingly, constructed and represented broader understandings of society, politics and culture.

The term 'entertainment press' describes journals, papers, magazines and web pages that cover music, theatre, film, vaudeville, variety performance, comedy, television and radio. With the growth of com-