

DYNAMICS OF THE BRITISH TABLOID PRESS

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Abstract

This article examines the decline of the tabloid press in England. It is a case study of competition between the *Daily Mirror* and *Sun* in the period 1968-1992 and the impact this had on the decline in reporting matters of the public sphere in favour of publishing material encouraging acts of consumption. It demonstrates that as consumption among the working-class grew over the period, editorial content moved away from matters of the public sphere in favour of material which encouraged acts of consumption. Further, it demonstrates that the advertising content of the two newspapers reflected consumption pattern changes in the economy as a whole during that period. Quantitative and qualitative content analysis also demonstrates that the increase in competition between the two newspapers for advertising revenue increased both titles' reliance on consumption editorial as a means of attracting new audiences. It was doing this at a historically-specific period in which consumption of mass-produced goods and services in the UK economy as a whole was increasing at its fastest-ever rate. The consequences of these changes were that tabloid newspapers in England were no longer able to be considered "newspapers" in the classic sense.

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Introduction

The *Sun* and the *Mirror* are the two most popular daily newspapers in Britain when measured by circulation.¹ Since 1969, when the *Sun* was purchased by Rupert Murdoch and relaunched as a direct competitor to the *Mirror*, the two titles have been competing vigorously for readers.

This paper charts the progress of that competition from 1968 (when the *Sun* was an unsuccessful mid-market daily aimed at young educated readers and the *Mirror* was a down-market title with the biggest circulation of any daily newspaper in the world) to 1992.² During this time the *Sun* overtook the *Mirror* as market leader and has, for nearly 30 years, dominated the tabloid newspaper market. It can fairly be argued that the *Sun* has set the news agenda and the *Mirror* has followed.

At their centre, the *Mirror* and *Sun* are commercial concerns seeking to maximise profits by selling copies of newspapers, and advertising space within them, to the largest number of people possible. It is impossible to sustain an argument that the two titles are channels of rational discourse which allow private individuals to come together as a public body to form reason-based public opinion. Nor can one sustain the argument that either newspaper is fulfilling a role as part of a mechanism by which ordinary people are able to bring their political representatives to account. The function of the *Mirror* and *Sun* is mainly commercial. Their political role is essentially passive. They wish to maintain the status quo and encourage conditions in which they are best able to maximise profits.

To succeed commercially, the *Mirror* and *Sun* need to attract a homogeneous audience. As Curran (1978), Hirsch and Gordon (1975) and Sparks (1993) have demonstrated, in order to survive as viable businesses down-market newspapers have to attract big circulations, and they do this by publishing material that has the broadest appeal. In the period 1968-1992, the *Mirror* and *Sun* had clearly concentrated on areas which would attract the largest possible audiences. In a post-Fordist fragmented society the only thing their readers had in common was their ability to consume, and this is seen in both the editorial and advertising content of the papers.

The Characteristics of the Market

There is a big potential audience for non-serious national daily newspapers in the UK. The relaunch of the *Sun* in 1969 expanded the market for down-market newspapers. Between 1968 and 1974 the market was expanded by 1.5 million copies (25 per cent) and by 1980 by a further one million (13 per cent). Even during the late 1980s when circulations for down-market newspapers were declining, the market was still selling about 1.3 million more copies per day compared with 1968.

Non-serious newspapers had, and continue to have, the largest market among national daily newspapers. As Table 1 shows, the circulation of the *Sun*, which put the pursuit of fun central to its editorial agenda from the moment of relaunch, improved significantly immediately and in 1970 increased to 1.51 million copies per day, the equivalent of a 132 per cent rise in a single year.³ The years 1969 to 1974 represented the period of fastest circulation growth in the history of the *Sun*. For the *Mirror*, this same period was one of circulation decline.

Table 1 : Circulation and Readership Figures for the *Mirror* and *Sun*

Circulation*	1968	1974	1980	1986	1992
<i>Mirror</i>	5.03	4.26	3.60	3.02	2.81
<i>Sun</i>	1.07	3.16	3.78	4.08	3.57
Readership					
<i>Mirror</i>	15.3	13.5	10.9	8.9	8.0
<i>Sun</i>	3.7	11.4	11.5	11.6	10.1

* Figures are in millions.

Source: Author, compiled from raw data in *National Readership Surveys* 1968, 1974, 1980, 1986 and 1992.

In 1968, the *Mirror* dominated the down-market sector of national daily newspapers, but by 1974, the *Sun* had established itself as a serious competitor, and soon after became the market leader. It is clear that, from 1969 onwards, the *Sun* and *Mirror* were competing for the same market. In 1968, a substitutability analysis of the two titles demonstrated that at this time there was a relatively high cross-over between readers of the *Sun* who sometimes read the *Mirror* (48 per cent), but a low cross-over between those *Mirror* readers who sometimes read the *Sun* (11 per cent).⁴ In later years the substitutability of the two titles became much closer, underlining the fact that they were competing vigorously for the same market.

Both the *Mirror* and *Sun* had more appeal to men than women. The ratio of men readers to women readers (aged 15-plus) was 55:45 for four of the research years, although in 1968 the *Sun's* appeal was heavily skewed towards men readers (61:39).

The crucial area of competition between the *Mirror* and *Sun* has always been among the under-35s. In 1980, roughly the mid point of the research period, for example, the *Sun* was read by 34 per cent of the 15-34-year-old population and the *Mirror*, 28 per cent. A pattern emerged that showed that both newspapers (but particularly the *Mirror*) also retained a sizeable proportion of readers aged 55-plus, even though they were perceived to be less attractive to advertisers than younger readers. An analysis of the editorial content of both papers, but particularly the *Sun* from 1969 onwards, showed that both titles were attempting to gain young readers. The *Sun* succeeded immediately by developing a brash tone which fitted exactly its target audience. The *Mirror* tended to maintain its air of seriousness at this time which only went to emphasise the gulf between the two products.

In terms of social grouping, the main areas of competition between the two newspapers had always been among those in the C2+D+E groups. A breakdown of readership profiles for each title showed that the proportion of total readers from C2+D+E remained fairly constant at about three quarters of the total.

In terms of competition among the various regions, for much of the research period a major point of competition had been among those living in the more prosperous conurbations of London and the south east and the Midlands. There has also been significant competition in the industrial north and north east, but not in Scotland. In 1968, the *Mirror* dominated throughout the country, although it was relatively stronger in the south than the north. By 1992, the *Mirror* only had 17 per cent of the UK market, and was strongest in Greater London, north west and north east and north and London and south east. The *Sun* had 21 per cent of the total population, and was strongest in Greater London, London and the south east and the Midlands.

Mirror and Sun Read as Vehicles of Consumption

Potential and actual readers of the *Mirror* and *Sun* became increasingly attractive to advertisers from the 1960s onwards as the ability to consume of the average household increased. The number of households holding consumer durables of all types, the greater availability of cars increased, and there was a shift towards home-based leisure activities. As Table 2 shows, in the population as a whole, the percentage of households with a car rose from slightly more than one half in 1969 to more than two thirds by 1992. Within the home, the 1960s saw a period of unprecedented growth in the purchase of consumer durables. This increase in the consumption of durables continued throughout the research period until by 1992, just about every household had a refrigerator or fridge/freezer and a television. A significant majority had a washing machine, a telephone and central heating. The size of the increase in consumer expenditure becomes even more evident when one holds prices constant. In real terms during the 1960s total consumer expenditure rose 30 per cent, in the 1970s it rose by 14 per cent and in the 1980s it rose by 106 per cent. This increase in consumption coincided with a period of rapid growth in pagination of both the *Mirror* and the *Sun*, and it is clear that there is a correlation between consumption expenditure and pagination growth.

Table 2: Percentage of Households with Certain Durable Goods, 1969-1992*

Durable Goods	1969	1974	1980	1986	1992
Car	51.2	55.7	60.3	62.4	67.6
Central heating, full or partial	25.1	43.0	59.1	70.1	81.8
Washing machine	62.7	68.9	78.7	82.9	87.9
Refrigerator or fridge/freezer	60.3	81.8	94.8	96.9	99.2
Television	91.2	94.0	96.9	97.1	98.3
Telephone	32.1	49.5	71.6	80.9	88.4
Video recorder	-	-	-	36.3	69.3
Home computer	-	-	-	15.1	19.1
Second dwelling	-	-	-	-	3.3
Cable television	-	-	-	-	9.3

* Data for 1968 was not available so 1969 was chosen as the best alternative.

- denotes data not available.

Source: Compiled by author from various editions of *Family Expenditure Survey*.

The availability of television within the home had been significant throughout the research period, evidencing a shift towards home-based entertainment. This was accompanied by the more than doubling of the consumption of video recorders from 1985 to 1992. The consumption of cable television reached 9.3 per cent in 1992.

In the economy as a whole, there was a marked increase in the consumption of leisure. Private leisure consumption (television, video, radio, home computers, books and periodicals, toys and hobbies, seeds and plants) was always significantly higher than publicly-consumed leisure activities, and increased by nearly 40 per cent (albeit from a low base) during the research period.

Most of the *Mirror* and *Sun* readers (and by extension potential readers) were from the C2+D+E social groupings. This places them among the poorer sections of the

population, but not necessarily among the most poor. Most of them were among a band of the population that was neither rich nor poor. In absolute terms, expenditure on food among those households who were potential *Mirror* and *Sun* readers increased by about eight times, clothes spending increased nine times as did spending on television and radio. The biggest increase by far was spending on transport and vehicles which increased by 25 times.

The potential for consumption among readers of the *Mirror* and *Sun* has grown since the 1960s. In the period up to 1992 the majority, or near majority, of consumption in the UK economy as a whole had been undertaken by readers of these two newspapers. So, as Table 3 shows, in 1974 — the first of the research years following the relaunch of the *Sun* as a truly mass-market newspaper — *Mirror* and *Sun* readers comprised more than 50 per cent of the UK total in the following groups: members of car owning households, members of two car households, petrol buyers, adults with phones, those who had moved home in the previous two years, holiday takers, those with colour television and those with 12 consumer durables.

Table 3: Proportion of total UK Consumption of a Selection of Goods and Services Made by Readers of *Mirror* or *Sun* (1974, in percentages)

	<i>Mirror</i>	<i>Sun</i>	<i>Mirror</i> and <i>Sun</i> combined
Proportion of UK population who are readers	33	28	61
Members of car owning hsehd	32	27	59
Member of two car hsehd	30	24	54
Petrol buyers	31	28	59
Adults with phone	38	23	61
Moved home in past 2 yrs	32	30	62
Holiday takers	32	27	59
Colour TV	34	32	66
12 consumer durables*	31	25	56

* Respondents were asked if they possessed 12 or more from the following list of durables: electric cooker, gas cooker, vacuum cleaner, electric dish washer, washing machine (twin-tub, automatic, or other), sewing machine, lawn mower (hand powered or powered), record player, colour television, electric fan heater, refrigerator, deep freezer, electric kettle, electric food mixer, power tool, electric polisher, electric iron (dry or steam), electric blanket.

Source: Author, adapting raw data from *National Readership Survey 1974*.

This suggests that, in 1974, the *Mirror* and *Sun* combined were read by about 25 million active consumers. It follows that advertisers of mass-consumption goods would consider these already active consumers to be a prime target market and direct their marketing and advertising endeavours accordingly. One must not forget also that there would be a significant proportion of the population who were in the C2+D+E social groups who would not be readers of the *Mirror* and the *Sun*, but who were themselves active consumers.

The presence of such people would be an incentive to both the *Mirror* and *Sun* to increase their circulation among their target markets, in order to make themselves yet more attractive to advertisers. Of course, the *Mirror* and *Sun* were newspapers in opposition in their markets, so a further incentive would be for each title to attempt to entice readers away from the other in order to increase market share. This competition

had also impacted on the editorial content of the two newspapers and provided further incentive to include editorial matter of potential interest to the widest possible audience.

The key position of the *Mirror* and *Sun* in delivering readers to advertisers was maintained post-1974, so that in 1980, when the combined readership of the two papers was about 22 million, they were able to deliver more than half of the total number of UK consumers in the following categories of goods and services: adults with phones, those who had moved home in the previous two years, holidaytakers, those who, separately or combined, had a colour television, an automatic washing machine, a fridge and a record player. There were six further categories of consumption in which *Mirror* and *Sun* readers combined accounted for 40-50 per cent of total consumption. This was happening at a time when household expenditure in the economy as a whole was growing at its faster-ever rate.

Advertising

The total advertising column inches in the *Sun* newspaper increased by 238 per cent from 1968 to 1992. In the *Mirror*, the increase was 152 per cent. The statistics for the *Sun* were affected by the fact that the 1968 IPC *Sun* was an entirely different product to the 1974 *Sun*. The IPC *Sun* in 1968 was unattractive to advertisers. Only 25.05 per cent of the content was devoted to advertising (in the same year the *Mirror* had 36.11 per cent). The pagination was low (reaching eight broadsheet pages on occasions) and the circulation believed to be about 650,000 (no accurate figure has been made public for this). The *Mirror*, in 1968, was close to its historical high with a circulation around five million.

The *Sun* made an immediate impact on the market following its 1969 relaunch, quickly gathering circulation and advertising, ultimately at the expense of the market leader, the *Mirror*. By 1974, the *Sun* advertising content had increased to 35.93 per cent of a 24-page tabloid. The relaunched *Sun* had become a down-market newspaper and had abandoned the middle-market aspirations of the IPC *Sun*. This is manifested in the advertising content: retail stores and products of mass appeal were becoming more evident. The IPC *Sun*, in contrast, had little retail stores advertising (indeed it had no supermarket advertising).

The characteristics of purchasing and consumption changed between 1968 and 1992. There has been an increase in the availability and consumer popularity of large stores and this was reflected in changes in advertising content. The changes in advertising of leisure and entertainment pursuits and motoring was further evidence of this. By 1992 there were products being advertised for home consumption that were not invented in earlier years (videos, satellite dishes and home computers, for example).

Although products of mass-consumption were vital ingredients to the newspapers' advertising mixes, and by the 1980s both titles were able to demonstrate that they were reaching mass audiences, they, in common with other popular newspapers, had to compete with commercial television for a share of the advertising market. Television is better able to deliver large heterogeneous audiences than newspapers and this has become the preferred medium of advertising for a large number of retailers of mass-consumption goods. Newspapers are often used by advertisers to complement their television advertising campaigns.

Advertising for the consumption of leisure was one of the main growth areas in advertising in both newspapers. Some areas of non-serious editorial (e.g. in areas of

consumption, such as pop music, television, sport) had grown significantly throughout the research period, but the advertisers did not support it directly. By 1992, the *Mirror* was publishing a virtually advertising-free television supplement on Saturday. The 1992 *Sun* had a similar problem with its Monday 24-page sports pull-out. This suggests that this type of editorial might not attract advertisers in the way that commentators such as Curran (1978) had assumed.

In the run-of-paper, the type of entertainment and leisure product or service advertised in this category remained constant throughout the research period. There were more foreign holidays advertised in the 1980s and 1992 than previously, but advertisements for cheap family holidays at UK holiday camps were also much in evidence. This is to be expected, since throughout the research period, 43-59 per cent of all holiday takers were readers of the *Mirror* or *Sun*.

The advertising space given to private leisure activities increased during the research period, but it was never that significant. The advertising aimed specifically at the young consumer tended to be for films and pop concerts, with a small amount for pop records.

Table four shows the amount of advertising of entertainment, leisure and sports goods and services in both titles. It was difficult to assess to what extent the *Mirror* and *Sun* were attempting to attract advertising through the provision of certain types of editorial. There was clearly an attempt to attract holiday advertising through editorial and both papers ran features about holiday destinations. This worked to an extent, but it was possible that the combination of economic recession and competition with other advertising space providers meant both papers had not acquired as much of this advertising as they would like.

Table 4: Percentage of Total Advertising Space in *Mirror* and *Sun* Devoted to Entertainment, Leisure and Sports

	1968	1974	1980	1986	1992
<i>Mirror</i>	3	7	10	10	16
<i>Sun</i>	9	8	15	9	15

Source: Author.

The television and sports pull-outs which were virtually free of advertising suggested that the *Mirror* and *Sun* did not include editorial matter simply because they believed it would be supported directly by advertisers. Instead, the process seemed to be that the newspapers include editorial material that was of the widest possible interest to readers and used this to attract advertisers of mass-consumer goods. So, for example, advertisements for Tesco supermarkets were of potential interest to all readers, regardless of their level of interest in sport or television.

This situation was in contrast to that of the up-market newspapers. As Curran (1970) demonstrated, there was sufficient evidence to show that such newspapers succeeded in attracting advertisers to support particular editorial endeavours. Observation suggests that this is clearly the case in the 1990s with up-market national daily newspapers. *The Guardian*, for example, runs sections on the media, education and public service which are wholly supported by related classified recruitment advertising.

The Elimination of the *Mirror* and *Sun* as a Public Sphere

There can be no doubt that the *Mirror* and *Sun* have abandoned the public sphere. Editors, owners and other practitioners can no longer sustain the argument that the titles are anything other than vehicles for non-serious material. Although earlier content analysis from Williams (1968) and Curran (1980) showed that neither title, nor other similar down-market national daily newspapers, put the reporting of public sphere matters at the centre of their editorial agenda there was in the past nonetheless a sizeable minority of such material.

In 1968, as Table 5 shows, the *Mirror* devoted 23 per cent of editorial space to public affairs material and the *Sun* 33 per cent. In 1992, this was 8 per cent in both the *Mirror* and the *Sun*. These statistics alone are sufficient to sustain the case that neither newspaper is concerned with the public sphere. If one takes as the definition of a “newspaper” that it should contain information and other material that help citizens learn about the world, debate their responses to it and reach informed decisions about what courses of action to adopt, one can see that the *Mirror* and *Sun* cannot be called “newspapers.”⁵

Table 5: Percentage of Editorial Space of *Mirror* and *Sun* Given to Public Affairs and Non-public Affairs Material

	1968	1974	1980	1986	1992
Public affairs					
<i>Mirror</i>	23	16	14	8	8
<i>Sun</i>	33	16	12	8	8
Non-public affairs					
<i>Mirror</i>	77	84	86	92	92
<i>Sun</i>	67	84	88	92	92

Public affairs editorial is civil courts, comment, foreign public affairs, health (public affairs), public affairs, parliament and politics (public affairs), royalty (official duties) and showbiz (business). Non-public affairs is everything else.

Source: Author

We should consider the *Mirror* and *Sun* as completely separate cultural artefacts. They do not offer public affairs material, preferring instead non-serious entertainment. As Table 6 shows, editorial content of both newspapers is dominated by two categories: sport and showbiz. There seem to be two main reasons why these categories are so dominant. Market research showed certain stories crossed the barriers of sex, class and age, appealing almost equally to all types of readers (see Curran 1980). Showbiz is one such type. Throughout the research period the number of households with a television grew, until by 1992, 98 per cent of households in the country had one.⁶ The single most important shared cultural experience of the nation has, therefore, been the watching of television. For most of this period the number of television channels it was possible to view was restricted to four (and before 1982 there were only three). The consequence of this was that many television programmes were able to attract huge audiences. Indeed, the way that television programmes are presented as episodes of series, regularly broadcast at the same time, is designed to encourage a following among television viewers. Viewers become interested in television programmes, and

this interest extends beyond the mere time in which the programme is on the air. So, viewers of soap operas, for example, are encouraged by the development of plot-lines to take an active interest in the lives of the characters and to tune in next time to see how they survive their latest crisis.

Table 6 : Percentage of Editorial Space in *Mirror* and *Sun* Given to Showbiz and Sport Material

	1968		1974		1980		1986		1992	
	<i>Mirror</i>	<i>Sun</i>	<i>Mirror</i>	<i>Sun</i>	<i>Mirror</i>	<i>Sun</i>	<i>Mirror</i>	<i>Sun</i>	<i>Mirror</i>	<i>Sun</i>
Showbiz	13	10	14	15	19	17	22	23	28	25
Sport	18	23	29	31	29	27	29	31	25	27

Source: Author.

It is clear that the makers and broadcasters of television programmes are themselves anxious to maintain large audiences (in the case of the independent sector to encourage advertising and in the case of the BBC to justify the cost of the television licence) so they collude with newspapers and magazines in order to obtain favourable editorial coverage. It is particularly the case when programme makers and broadcasters feel threatened by rival programmes and wish to maintain their audience. It is also the case when a new programme is trying to enter the market and either build a new audience or entice an existing audience away from an established programme.

The coverage of television in both the *Mirror* and *Sun* increased from 1985 when the BBC launched a soap opera called *EastEnders*, set in a fictional area of east London. The programme makers, anxious to create an audience, sought and achieved editorial coverage in newspapers and magazines. Since both *EastEnders* and the mass circulation newspapers were attempting to attract the same audience, stories about the show were in demand. *EastEnders* was a new entrant into a market dominated by *Coronation Street* so *EastEnders* producers were keen for publicity to attract an audience, while *Coronation Street* producers needed publicity to maintain theirs. The result was an overall increase in coverage of television, with both the *Mirror* and the *Sun* running big stories about the two soaps nearly every day. *EastEnders* also had a storyline policy to sympathetically tackle controversial social issues, such as homosexuality, rape, the psychological effects of unemployment and racial tensions. This agenda went contrary to that of the tabloid newspapers, particularly the *Sun*, which in turn made it more worthy to them of editorial space, although in this case the publicity was far from favourable.

There is further evidence that broadcasters and newspapers collude in an attempt to create an interest in television programmes. The *Sun*, alone among down-market newspapers, has devoted much editorial space to the programmes broadcast on BSkyB Television (previously named Sky Television). This has been the case even though in 1994 only 26 per cent of *Sun* readers had satellite television.⁷ Both the *Sun* and BSkyB are controlled by companies which are themselves ultimately controlled by Rupert Murdoch. From the late-1980s, Murdoch had been trying to increase the audience for his Sky satellite channels. One way he did this was to use the editorial pages of the *Sun* (and other newspapers in his sphere of influence) to give publicity to his programmes.⁸

The amount of space devoted to sport also increased greatly over the research period, in most years accounting for between one quarter and one third of total editorial space. One reason for this was the increase in coverage of sport on television, which meant that more people actively followed sporting events. Television sport is also an important ingredient in the marketing mix of satellite television where premium channels now exist.

The coverage of sport on television also changed during the research period. People, able to get results and follow bigger sporting events on television and radio, were more likely to want a different form of editorial coverage from their newspapers. Both the *Mirror* and *Sun* recognised that many people wanted to see the stories behind the event they have already witnessed on television, so the main ingredients of the sports pages were rather more features based than news oriented. This was seen in a number of ways, but most notably during the football season in 1992 (and since) both the *Mirror* and *Sun* published special supplements of 24 pages each Monday reviewing the previous weekend's matches.

Although previous editorial content analyses have measured non-serious material, the present analysis has taken that examination a stage further to ascertain how much editorial material was given to the process of consumption. Showbiz and sports coverage represented two editorial categories that encouraged consumption by the reader, but they were not the only ones. In showbiz, for example, as well as editorial matter on soap operas both titles devoted a large proportion of space to the viewing experience. In 1992, both newspapers had 24-page supplements on Saturdays which consisted mainly of the coming week's television listings. This accounted for much of the increase in space from 1986 to 1992. It also went some way to accounting for the increase in pagination over the period.

In addition to television listings, both newspapers offered editorial material in the form of reviews and previews on television programmes. This material was of use to the dedicated viewer and might, in some way, be described as forming an information service. Although one would hesitate to call this public sphere information, it is nonetheless the case that the reader can use the information supplied here to make a considered choice about what to watch on television. There are other editorial sections which help the reader to make consumption decisions. Both newspapers used their sports pages to preview forthcoming sporting events. On a mundane level, this usually comprised news about team selections and club gossip. However, for big sporting occasions, especially those such as the Grand National or FA Cup final which were to be televised live, the newspapers supplied special editorial supplements to enhance the viewing experience.

Some editorial material was present in both papers that was a blatant attempt to entice purchasing decisions. This type of editorial was included, both because it had an interest to the reader, (although most of it is readily available in other publications or on television) and to the advertiser. Fashion and recipes had always been a staple part of women's page editorial, for example, although neither newspaper had succeeded in attracting women readers in the same proportion as they form in the population as a whole. By 1992, both the *Mirror* and the *Sun* ran regular sections on motoring, property and women's material which appeared to have been included with the intention (not too successfully) of selling advertising directly against it. This was also true of some of the showbiz material (particularly films) which tended to be

put in special supplements. In 1992, the *Mirror* had a 20-page screen supplement on Thursdays, for example.

The *Sun's* relaunch not only expanded the market for mass-circulation newspapers but throughout the research period both the *Mirror* and the *Sun* educated its publics to become consumers. They did this not only by including advertisements — although this was, of course, important — but by placing material encouraging consumption at the centre of its editorial agenda. This did not mean that the *Mirror* and *Sun* had an agenda to expand capitalist markets. Rather, the two newspapers were able to capitalise on the ability of working-class people to purchase, in particular, consumer goods.

There was evidence that the editorial material in both newspapers encouraged people to define themselves by what they consumed. This was seen in many ways. The coverage of showbiz and sporting personalities, often concentrated on their wealth and would include interviews and photographs from the personality's home. Much in evidence would be the opulent lifestyle, often highlighting the big house and the big car. With these trapping of success, readers were encouraged to believe, came happiness (often personified as the loving wife). Ordinary readers were also encouraged to aspire to happiness through consumption. This took many forms, but one can sum up the tabloids' route to happiness in the slogan "looking good and feeling great." So, readers were encouraged to wear fashionable clothes, use the best make-up and diet and/or exercise in order to achieve the perfect body and through that, happiness.

Individuals define themselves by what they consume (or aspire to consume), and the *Mirror* and *Sun* play important roles in constructing that identity, and the ways that identity can be validated through acts of market-mediated consumption. The *Mirror* and *Sun* articulated consumer desires and defined for their readers the parameters of legitimate aspirations. One might aspire to a big car, a house or a sexually attractive body, but these were to be achieved through the consumption of goods made available in the marketplace. Such aspirations are limited and individualistic. No longer does the *Mirror* espouse collectivist action to ensure that the whole population should enjoy a decent standard of living (however one might want to define it), rather it seeks to convince people that they can achieve a state of happiness through their own endeavours of consumption. In 1995, when the *Mirror* advocated that readers take up membership of the Labour Party it did so, not on a collectivist agenda, but rather as a means to support a party leader who was intent on breaking the traditional collectivism of the party (the block vote) in favour of one-member-one-vote decision making.⁹

Conclusion

By 1992, it was impossible to distinguish much between the *Mirror* and *Sun* as cultural artefacts. They both sought the same readership, they both eschewed the serious in favour of the non-serious. Central to their editorial agendas were the pursuits of the sensational, the personification of stories and the highlighting of human interest. This was seen in the treatment of such topics as crime or disaster, the real-life experience revelation of the person caught up in tragedy, and the elevation of the merely trivial to matters of national discourse.

Both newspapers had the tendency to place the private sphere before the public, in such a way the personal lives of people became an increasing point of editorial

competition. Both newspapers trade in controversial topics, but not as a means of rational discourse. So, such public issues as racial discrimination, Aids and the growth of an economic underclass are treated in a sensational manner with huge headlines and short stories. Nowhere is there a sustained attempt to explain the complexities of issues; everything is reduced to a simple slogan.

Today, the fact that the *Sun* has a circulation advantage over the *Mirror* of 1.5 million is almost certainly because the journalists who work for it are better at producing the right editorial mix.

Since 1969, one could see the *Sun* setting the editorial agenda with the *Mirror* lagging behind. This was evident from the moment of the relaunch when the *Sun* placed the pursuit of fun at the centre of its editorial philosophy. The staid *Mirror* was slow to react, but as its circulation fell steadily it moved into direct competition with the *Sun* on the *Sun*'s terms. This situation has been repeated since as the *Sun* legitimised certain styles of journalism, particularly in the area of the private sphere. The *Sun* pursued the Royal Family, errant politicians and showbiz personalities while the *Mirror* followed some way behind.

The *Mirror* and *Sun* do not have a public sphere editorial agenda. Its readers probably do not have any interest in the workings of the establishment or establishment organisations and do not wish to monitor them. This is probably because they feel they have no way of enforcing change. The only time that they do have a say is at a general election and this is the one time that historically the down-market newspapers have increased the amount of coverage of politics.

For the rest of the time readers seem content to buy newspapers that entertain, and include editorial material that is relevant to their everyday lives. The *Mirror* and the *Sun* can no longer be regarded as "newspapers" and we must find new ways to explain their importance within working-class culture.

Notes:

1. In April 1998 the *Sun*'s average circulation over the previous six months had been 3.9 million and the *Mirror*'s, 2.4 million: *Press Gazette* 22 May 1998, p6.
2. The research period concentrated of the following years: 1968, 1974, 1980, 1988 and 1992.
3. These statistics are courtesy of the Audit Bureau of Circulation.
4. National Readership Survey, 1968.
5. This definition is adapted from Peter Dahlgren (1991, 1).
6. Family Spending 1992.
7. See *Sun*, March 10, 1994, 27-28 for results of a survey conducted by MRIB into *Sun* readers' attitudes to television.
8. The *Sun* is not the only newspaper guilty of this. In 1995, after the *Mirror* launched its own cable television channel, Live TV, it too began to include editorial material that was an obvious plug for its television station.
9. *The Sun*, meanwhile, found new ways to exploit its readers as consumers. In 1995 it launched its own Visa credit card with a four-page in-paper supplement.

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