Contesting Media History

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Abstract
This paper is concerned with the relationship between theory and history in the development of media history as a subject area, and in particular the way that it has come to conceptualise power. Contesting Media History argues that the history of the communications has become increasingly isolated within its related disciplines, cut off from the rich theoretical insights developed elsewhere and provincialised into the 'story of the present'. The paper traces the roots of this intellectual isolation in the neologistic frameworks adopted to explain new media technologies, which have selectively appropriated media discourses and practices to underpin claims of the novelty of new media, and in the fact that much of media history is written from the standpoint of institutional actors. These two factors taken together, I argue, produce a history which is overly dependent on monolithic themes; teleological, insofar as an essential and eternal nature is imputed to successful forms and institutions; inadequately accounts for th e relationship between changes in media production and changes in media texts; and neglects to place communications history in the context of broader social change. As against this the paper traces the outlines of a history of the media 'from the ground up', using a study of alternate constructions of the public sphere in late Victorian journalism as an example of the way a more inclusive history could be developed.

In starting to write this piece, seeking distraction from what I saw as the real work at hand, I took refuge in an old favourite from my shelves, David Cannadine's extraordinary *Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy*. However Cannadine's work is too far-sighted and perspicacious to give any comfort to a shirking researcher. His concern with the 'constipated' nature of history as a discipline in the late 1970s and 1980s led him to write the work partly:

> as a protest against the current fashion in British history writing that stresses continuity at the expense of change. Of course, it is never easy to get the balance right between what is old and what is new in any past age, and it cannot be denied that during the 1960s, 'crisis' and 'revolution' were among the two most over-used words in the historian's vocabulary. But now the

> fashion has gone too far the other way, and it has become all too common for scholars to claim that nothing important ever actually happened, that there are no great landmarks in our national story (Cannadine 1990, 4).

This in many respects encapsulates my position in relation to the writing of media history. With the coming of the internet and new media studies as an inter-disciplinary subject area within the wider disciplines of sociology, communications studies, politics and countless others, the tendency has been for scholars to shore up claims concerning the internet's novelty and revolutionary capacities through recourse to the idea of a radical schism with the past. Of course such claims are hardly uncontested. The counter-reaction has been equally adamant, centring on the claim that nothing real has changed, that new media merely represents the continuation of old media by other means. Historians have been rushed to the scene to pronounce on the continuity between the telegraph and the internet, web journalism and the citizen journalism of the sixteenth century, the interactivity of the web and the participation of audiences for broadcasting (see Knight 2006; Holmes 2005; Standage 1999). This work does not seek to engage with either of these positions, but instead offers a critique of the assumptions of both problematics. It begins with a critique of the idea of continuity and schism as this has been operationalised in media history, and the prenotions on which this is based, moving on to illustrate the problem by reference to political communication, and offering a critique of this in the form of the example of Victorian journalism.

The idea of a radical schism between new media, in particular the internet, and prior forms of media is a common trope of the field. Major approaches to understanding new media have entrenched the idea that the coming of the internet and interactive media brings about a new media age in which the nature of the media has been fundamentally altered. Thus for example, many have followed the lead of early theorist Mark Poster (1995), who goes so far as to posit the internet and new media as the birth of what he terms the 'Second Media Age'. The First Media Age, for Poster, is characterised by one-to-many communication, hierarchical relations between producers and consumers, and audience passivity. The Second Media Age, by contrast, is characterised by multiplicity of relations between the audience and the producer, shifting boundaries and the overwhelming logic of interactivity. More recently the notion of new media technologies bringing about communicatively based societal changes has been expanded and solidified in the coining of a variety of neologistic theories of the communicative age, including the idea of mobile communications and 'apparatgeist' (Katz and Aakhus 2002), the Virtual Society, the Network Society, Cybersociety 2.0, and E-topia (see Castells 2000; Mitchell 2000; Jones 1998). Other scholars have argued that the changes in the communicative 'base' of society have radical implications for the way that we study the media. David Gauntlett, for example, recently compiled a helpful guide

to the new 'Media Studies 2.0', arguing that the dominance of new media perspectives in media studies requires, amongst other things, the acceptance that:

> (t)he view of the internet and new digital media as an 'optional extra' is …replaced with recognition that they have fundamentally changed the ways in which we engage with *all* media

and that

> (c)onventional concerns with power and politics are reworked in recognition of these points, so that the notion of super-powerful media industries invading the minds of a relatively passive population is compelled to recognise and address the context of more widespread creation and participation (Gauntlett 2007).

Gauntlett is correct in his identification of the internet as the dominant media, but such a claim requires clarification. For Gauntlett, as for many theorists of cyber-society, the internet is the dominant form of media insofar as it is seen as the form towards which all other media aspire and into which all other media are subsumed through convergence. This is a rather different claim from other possible bases on which purported dominance could be founded, for example, numerical superiority of users, if such could be demonstrated. However, the claims put forward above do not refer to the dominance of the internet as a media, but to the dominance of the idea of the internet in media studies, a position it achieves largely through the proselytising efforts of its admirers. Thus, just as twenty years ago television was the major model for media studies, with the result that research paradigms were dominated by concerns with effects and regulation, so the internet today dominates a scholarly agenda into media more generally.

And herein lies the problem. Just as the dominance of television set an agenda for the investigation of the media qua regulable entity/ social actor, the dominance of the internet as a model sets an agenda for media studies which emphases the features purported to belong to the new media age. In the context of the highly utopian/ dystopian cast that debates over the internet have assumed, these emerge as issues such as interactivity, a new electronic agora, equality of access to the media, and the deconstruction of producer/audience relationships to name but a few. The claim that the internet brings about these as novelties performs its work by dint of extrapolating these features and then reflecting back on their historical 'roots' or lack thereof. In accounts which position the internet as entirely novel, this reflection takes the form of positing a radical schism with the past. However, as we might expect, such accounts engender equally vitriolic responses, from those who wade into the fray to argue that the features imputed to new media are also present in other historical eras. What this achieves is to re-organise the history of the media into the story of the present, changing the focus of research from the

nature of media in other historical eras to the titanic struggle to bring about the internet, which we now see extending back to the 18th Century (Standage 1999). The story of the media becomes, then, the story of contestation around access to production, emphasising the themes of democratic involvement, collective decision making, and so forth, and thus the history of the media becomes a Whigist prelude to the present.

In order to illustrate this, we can consider the example of the nature of the public sphere. As Terranova has argued, the advent of the internet brought in its wake an intensification of interest in the notion of media as a public sphere:

> As soon as the internet started to materialise as a set of relays and links between different computer networks, it produced a widespread and hopeful expectation of a resurgence of the public sphere in a 'cyberdemocratic' mode. A networked multitude, possessing its own means of communication, freed from the tyranny of broadcasting, would rise to challenge the phony public sphere of television and the press (2004, 135).

The internet is understood as an electronic agora, a public sphere in the sense that access is available to all, participation is solicited from all and a guarantee of equality is underwritten by the anonymity of the net. As I have argued elsewhere, these claims are themselves profoundly problematic (Cavanagh 2007). However in this context, the problem is the extent to which they are dependent on the idea that the internet recovers from the past an ideal form of media /public sphere which once existed but which has been lost to forces of change which the internet now challenges. In short it is to take the supposed formal features of the internet, read back into history the problems to which these are a solution, and then read further back to the point where these problems began. As Thompson (2000) points out the difficulty with such accounts is that they tend to lump together phenomena of a radically different nature, implying continuity - and schism to be sure- but continuities and schisms around stable categories. Thus in Habermas' oft-quoted formulation of the public sphere:

> The press - once an exemplary forum of rational-critical debate was transformed...and the values of leisure and entertainment increasingly displaced the concern with reasoned argument and debate (cited Thompson 2000, 239).

This is, however as Thompson goes on to argue, misleading not least insofar as it imputes a false 'seriousness' to the press of the 18th Century, and tends to aggregate scandals of radically differing natures. Thus sexual scandals are placed in the same category as financial scandals or scandals concerning the misuse of political power (Thompson 2000, 240-241). In the same sense 'participation' as a category is overwritten as 'interactivity' as though the two activities had the same

phenomenal forms and acted as interchangeable terms. Likewise, terms such as 'democratic involvement', 'decision making', and 'equality in debate' acquire an artificial stability.

That they do so is largely a result of the different ways in which continuity and schism are understood. In any complex system, elements enter into interactions with other elements. In so doing they realise or bring into being some, but not all, of their attributes, attributes which, as DeLanda has argued, are then later re-described in terms of identity or essential nature (2006, 28-31). When continuity is posited as the historical principle driving current configurations of these elements, then these realised attributes are said to the basis of the stability. Where schism is implied, then non-realised attributes in the original configuration are seen to be at the root. The end results of this confusion of tongues are the "deplorable inconsistencies and interminable debates between authors who, on the same subject, are not talking about the same thing" (Mauss "La Priere" reproduced in Bourdieu et al 1991, 98).

This can best be illustrated if we consider theoretical and comparative approaches to viewing media systems and of these probably the most influential and sophisticated is the triumvirate model of relations between the media, power and the public proposed by Blumler and Gurevitch in 1977. In contrast to prior approaches, Blumler and Gurevitch posit media, the audience, and power as a system, arguing that a 'systems outlook implies that the interactions of the various actors occur within an overarching framework of organizing principles that are designed to regularize relationships of media institutions to political institutions' (1995, 13-14). In order to relate media power to political power they argue that whilst the political realm possesses its own inherent power base, the media's power is derived from the structural enlargement of the receiver base, which is to say the ability of the media to act as a go-between between the 'public' qua mass and the power elite; the psychological orientations of the audience, which the authors understand as primarily concerned with questions of credibility and trust; and the normative basis of their authority, which is to say, democratic traditions of freedom of speech. In understanding the media, power, and public triumvirate as a system, the authors argue for a complementarity of roles within the system such that particular configurations of power and the media imply particular configurations of the audience (Ibid, 15). In describing the nature of political communications in this fashion, the authors crucially allow for direct comparison of media systems, both across space and time.

However, whilst Blumler and Gurevitch's analysis of political communications as a system may enjoy a high level of theoretical sophistication and be capable of underpinning comparative analysis, it achieves this only through the reification of some categories, for example, the 'political' as synonymous with the 'state'; the

reduction of other categories to one or more of their formal properties, for example, the 'public' to 'voters' or 'viewers'; the consequent elevation of one category to determinative primacy, in this case the political –media relationship configuring the audience; and the assumption of stable boundaries between categories, for example that between 'politics' and the 'communicative aspects of politics'. In so doing they appropriate as a resource that which can only properly be investigated as a topic (Zimmerman and Pollner 1970). This omission is hardly an oversight however, for in understanding these roles as logically necessary aspects of a system, rather than as the product of unique historical circumstances, the authors abnegate the necessity for empirical investigation for, as DeLanda argues '(w)hile logically necessary relations may be investigated by thought alone, contingently obligatory ones involve a consideration of empirical questions (2006, 11).

Nevertheless, whilst Blumler and Gurevitch's model is problematic in respect to categories such as the audience and the political, it does generate a sophisticated set of sensitising concepts for understanding the media itself. In context the model of media relations developed by the authors can be understood as part of a brief and productive flowering of enquiry into the media which subverted a longer term trend in media studies towards the acceptance of established institutions at their own estimation. In the 1970s, there was a clear agenda for the investigation of the claims of participants in the field as topics rather than as a resource. Works such as Michael Schudson's investigation of the development of objectivity as an idol of journalism in the United States and, in the UK, Boyce's work on news as an ideology, typify this trend for applying insights from the sociology of journalism to the field of history. Thus Boyce, for example, argued the ideology of journalism as the Fourth Estate 'accumulated as a result of the attempt by the press to establish its credentials in the eyes of politicians and the public in the nineteenth century' (Boyce 1978, 20). In this sense it can be considered as a 'political myth' (Ibid, 21) providing a legitimate role for journalism in the political field. It is, then, in Bourdieuian terms, a field manoeuvre, which increases the value of journalism's cultural and social capital in the field of politics (see Bourdieu 1988).

That it has also been a highly successful one (Hesmondhalgh 2006) tends to blind us to the fact of it. In this way, what Bourdieu has referred to as the 'force of the preconstructed' is imported into media studies acting, in Durkheim's terms as:

> a veil interposed between the things and ourselves, concealing them from us…*idola* which, resembling ghost-like creatures distort the true appearance of things, but which we nevertheless mistake for the things themselves (Durkheim, reproduced in Bourdieu 1991, 94).

This has come about in large measure as a result of precisely the blurring of boundaries that Gauntlett (2007) identifies as a key redeeming feature of 'Media Studies 2.0'. The academic refusal of categories such as producers and audiences implied by this agenda neatly sidesteps the questions of power and societal definitions, implying a parity of power and purpose between the audience, producers and audience-producer hybrids. As in the case of the idea of a public sphere what comes to be at stake is not the nature of media power, but the ownership and location of it. In formulating the question of the media in this way, prenotions of the power of the media and the social role of commentators, editors, journalists and so forth are accepted wholesale. The end result of this is that much media history is written from the point of view of institutional perspectives, and the relevant factors, actors, and circumstances which are brought to bear on understanding media history are those which are relevant from the point of view of these institutions. Thus the history of the press becomes the heroic clash between journalism and the state for control of information or ownership of the public interest. That this is one story that can be told, and should be told, does not make it the only one.

Thus to summarise, new media studies has derived its lexicon of categories with which to conduct analysis as a result of these two factors, the formalisation of phylogeny as ontogeny and the nativisation of academic perspectives. However insofar as these are extrapolations from the present, and from present concerns, these assume an artificial homogeneity and eternal character. What this opens up then is the question not of how the different and static relations between the audience, media and power are subject to alteration through time, but how these elements are territorialised, de-territorialised and redefined over time. In order to explore this further, the remainder of this article takes a fairly well known example, that of *The Maiden Tribute*… scandal of the mid 1880s as an example. I examine the three major ways in which the categories have been stabilised, looking how the elements within the system are constructed and contested in relation to each other. What this foregrounds are questions such as how does an audience for political communications come into being? Where credibility is an interactional achievement, how is it established? How are roles within the system developed, extended and maintained in relation to each other?

The Maiden Tribute

The bare facts of the case of *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon* (*Pall Mall Gazette* 6,7, 8 &10 July 1885) are well documented. The story was published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, a London evening newspaper, then under the editorship (1883-90) of William Stead, a northern reformist whose career was characterised by his espousal of progressive causes and religious zeal. *The Maiden Tribute* styled itself as an investigation of child prostitution in the 'London Labyrinth'. In intimate and

sensationalist detail, Stead documented his investigation of the traffic in underage girls for prostitution and his eventual purchase of a thirteen year old 'virgin warranted pure', Eliza 'Lily' Armstrong. The publication of the story caused public outcry, culminating in a large demonstration in London's Hyde Park, billed (by Stead himself) as London's 'first town meeting'. Thereafter vigilance committees took action against all 'manifestations of male lust' including pornographic publications, music halls and theatres (Walkowitz 1992, 82). In response to heightened public sensibilities the government of Salisbury pushed through a final reading of a stalled Criminal Law Amendment Act which had proposed to raise the age of consent to 16, but which had been vacillating between the Houses since 1881. However this violent and unpredictable backlash also included Stead as one of its targets, leading to his prosecution and imprisonment for the abduction of Eliza.

Whilst the facts of *The Maiden Tribute* are not in dispute, rendering it a useful study for analysis of this nature, the handling of the case of *The Maiden Tribute* by contemporaries and modern commentators emphasises multiple themes, motives and effects. For Judith Walkowitz (1992), who has made the most systematic and in depth study of Stead's work, the text can be read simultaneously as a heartfelt plea for reform, as part of a tradition of urban exploration and ethnography, as part of the policing of women, as a feminist text deriving from early feminist agitation, and as related to the commercialisation of public space.

For Ornebring and Johnsson (2004) the significance of *The Maiden Tribute* lies in the extent to which it can be seen as an intervention in a prior class conflict. For the authors, Stead's populist appeals to the public at large in the *Pall Mall Gazette* served to constitute a proletarian public sphere which existed alongside and rivalled the legitimated bourgeois public sphere. Whereas the public sphere of the traditional press was based on principles of factuality and reason, Ornebring and Jonnson argue that the proto-tabloid culture of the new journalism allowed for multiple forms of involvement, including those deriving from emotional investment in social issues.

For Hampton (2001), such claims are profoundly problematic. Whilst the author agrees that Stead's work, amongst others, established a new format of journalism, he rejects the argument that this new journalism created greater political participation.

> On the one hand it appears as a more inclusive approach to journalism: working class readers were invited to participate in a (journalistic) conversation about topics that actually interested them. On the other hand, this opening of the press to the commonplace meant an acceptance of the notion of multiple publics, publics that were not equal participants in political power relations...Readers of the 'new journalism' were increasingly

> included in a public conversation, but effectively excluded from conversations about the government and 'public affairs' (Hampton 2001, 227).

In this sense the creation of a rival journalism merely servers to concretize the asymmetry of publics which further exclude the powerless from decision making. For Hampton the chief historical significance of *The Maiden Tribute* is that it points the way to an emergent trend towards the Americanisation of British journalism through the depoliticisation of the press into social issues and the reportage of the everyday.

What is not in dispute by historians is the novelty of the style of journalism which *The Maiden Tribute* represents. Stead himself was a skilled self-publicist whose campaigning on the part of the downtrodden of society was no less adroit than his campaign for what he termed 'Government by Journalism'. For Stead the ideal of journalism was the representation of the public where the public can be understood as the buying readers. This equation of consumption with democracy (Hampton 2001, 226) meant that formal inclusion into the 'political system' proposed by the new journalism was based on buying power, sidestepping the question of formal enfranchisement. That journalists and editors could play such a role is therefore supported by an appeal to the market; the mass self-selects/-elects its representatives who are, by the rules of commerce, required to be perennially aware of and sensitive to the needs of their constituents. However, Stead did not interpret this to mean that the editor's primary role was the reflection of extant opinion or the mere presentation of balance. In fact Stead was scathing in his judgement of objectivity as this was practiced amongst his peers:

> An extraordinary idea seems to prevail with the eunuchs of the craft that leadership, guidance, governance, are alien to the calling of a journalist. These conceptions of what is a journalist's duty, if indeed they recognize that imperious word as having any bearing upon their profession, is hid in mystery. If it may be inferred from their practice, their ideal is to grind out a column of more or less well-balanced sentences, capable of grammatical construction, conflicting with no social conventionality or party prejudice, which fills so much space in the paper, and then utterly, swiftly, and for ever vanishes from mortal mind. How can they help to make up other people's minds when they have never made up their own? (Stead 1886)

For John Thompson, it is Stead's role as a researcher that is of most significance. His 'brazen expose of the prostitution trade helped to define an emerging role for journalists as investigators' (2000, 53-4). What this brings us on to, then, is the question of how the role of the press is developed and stabilised.

Stability through Self-definitions
For Blumler and Gurevitch the roles of media personnel are central to systems of political communication. In their 1977 article, they outline four possible configurations of the audience/ media/ political system in which the roles for media personnel are as 'editorial guides', 'moderators', 'watchdogs' or 'entertainers', where the complementary roles for the audience are those of 'partisan', 'liberal citizen', 'monitor' or 'spectator' (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, 15). The degree of correspondence between these elements is taken by the authors as a measure of system integration, with a low level of integration representing 'a situation where the leading elements are at cross-purposes with each other, and in which a high degree of communication conflict across levels prevails' (Ibid, 16). What Blumler and Gurevitch's model presumes, however, is that such roles can be stabilised as discrete and independent ones, that a particular 'media system' is identifiable, and that at any given point there is a mutual exclusivity of categories and their occupants.

For Stead, on the contrary, his roles in the drama were multiple. In his explicit espousal of the issue as a cause, rather than a story, Stead positioned himself as an activist rather than a commentator or an editor and it is certainly Stead's role as a campaigning editor which has attracted the most scholarly attention. However, whilst for modern commentators such as Thompson (2000: 53-4) this role is a laudable one, contemporaries, whilst not blind to its implications, were less impressed. Thus *The Observer* upbraided Stead arguing '(j)ournalism is not a mission, and its editors are neither missionaries nor evangelists' (cited in Diamond 2004, 116). Moreover, although the role of crusading editor was one which Stead attempted to assume, contemporaries resisted the establishment of this role. For the *Western Morning News* (Ibid, 116), Stead was not the instigator of the claims forwarded, but rather a good man spurred on by the 'shrieking sisterhood', a characterisation which presented him instead as a deluded tool of more established interests. The crusader image that Stead tried to portray was, thus, multiply contested by contemporaries who disputed both its value and veracity.

In constructing an image of himself as an investigative journalist, Stead drew upon and developed a 19th Century tradition of urban ethnography (Walkowitz 1992, 15-39). This tradition, going back to the observations of Dr Kay in Manchester in the 1820s was itself a product of increasing philanthropic activities on the parts of the emergent professional and bourgeois classes (see Englander and O'Day 1995, 1-46). The tradition of fact finding in the name of reform acquired over the course of the century a patina of science, coming, by the 1920s to be the joint province of journalism and sociology, in part as a consequence of the institutionalisation of disciplines of anthropology and social science; in part as a result of the high public profile of other, less local, explorers; and in part as a result of the reforming zeal with which such peregrinations were associated. Stead's

appropriation of the trope of the urban explorer allowed him to tap into these meanings simultaneously, positioning himself as a detached participant observer in a perplexing alien world (Walkowitz 1992). However this role also was challenged. The legal case which followed the publication of *The Maiden Tribute* and the subsequent imprisonment of Stead contradicts the category of aloof observer, portraying Stead instead as one of the elite cads whom he sought to unveil.

However these were far from the only roles understudied by Stead. Shortly following the publication of *The Maiden Tribute* we find the editor playing the part of the Hans Brinker, holding back the tide of public rage. In the wake of the publication of *The Maiden Tribute*, Stead published a lurid editorial, *The Siege of Northumberland Street*, on the scenes of chaos as 'the public' tried to purchase copies of the publication.

> For three days the crowd of hungry runners have surged down upon us. Gaunt, hollow-faced men and women, with trailing dress and ragged coats. …London is raging for news and sends its regiments for the supply. And so the crowd raged at the door under the summer sky—raged and wrestled, fought with fist and feet, with tooth and nail, clamouring for the sheets wet from the press, a sea of human faces, tossed hither and thither by the resistless tide which swept from the Strand above; gesticulating, unceasingly hooting, groaning, climbing on window-sill, …. Now and then there was a break, but it dosed up again like the tide over a drowning man (*Pall Mall Gazette* 9 July 1885).

The inhuman descriptions of the crowd, as a 'sea' of 'hooting', 'groaning', and 'raging' that beat upon the high shore of Northumberland Street was designed to evoke the fear of the mass, of the raw power of the crowd, and of revolution. Neither was Stead at all cryptic in his identification of the target of *The Maiden Tribute* as the political elite, for we find:

> Even considerations of self-interest might lead our rulers to assent to so modest a demand. For the hour of Democracy has struck, and there is no wrong which a man resents like this. If it has not been resented hitherto, it is not because it was not felt. The Roman Republic was founded by the rape of Lucrece, but Lucrece was a member of one of the governing families. A similar offence placed Spain under the domination of the Moors, but there again the victim of Royal licence was the daughter of a Count. But the fathers and brothers whose daughters and sisters are purchased like slaves, not for labour, but for lust, are now at last enrolled among the governing classes—a circumstance full of hope for the nation, but by no means without menace for a class. Many of the French Revolutionists were dissolute enough, but nothing gave such an edge to the guillotine as the memory of the Pare aux Cerfs; and even in our time the horrors that attended the suppression of the Commune were largely due to the despair of

> the femme vengeresse. Hence, unless the levying of the maiden-tribute in London is shorn of its worst abuses—at present, as I shall show, flourishing unchecked—resentment, which might be appeased by reform, may hereafter be the virus of a social revolution. It is the one explosive which is strong enough to wreck the Throne (Stead 1885).

Here Stead was more successful. None challenged his claim to represent and direct the mob, perhaps because this trope was too well established to permit such refutation.

Thus, attempting to stabilise the meaning of *The Maiden Tribute* at the level of the self-identification of the chief actor, understanding the press's role in this drama as the establishment of a new form of journalism, or as an instance of the increasing power of the press, overlooks the extent to which such definitions are an effect not merely of the system but further of contestation within it. The original model appears far too static and requires too great a singularity of identity to make it workable.

Stability through the Audience

The fluid roles played by Stead in the drama also raises the question of the stability of the audience. As Marchand (1985, 80-2) has argued communication via the media is profoundly structured by 'secondary' audiences and multiple referents for the audience within the same communicative act. For Stead, the proposed audience were ostensibly the 'public at large', the masses in whose name he is proposing to speak. The ideal role of an editor in Stead's view was to be an active representative for his constituency of readers. It was on this basis that he argued for the beneficent role of "Government by Journalism".

> '(A) member (of the House of Commons) immediately after his election leaves his constituency, and plunges into a new world with a different atmosphere, moral, social, and political. But an editor, on the other hand, must live among the people whose opinions he essays to express' (Stead 1886).

The perceived contiguity of the editor and his readership did not however imply parity for Stead and in this regard his claim to custodianship of the public interest was morally ambiguous. In Stead's representation of the 'public' as the 'mob' (see above), the public are at one and the same time 'the audience' and a rhetorical device used to shore up Stead's claims to be able to direct the drama.

With this in mind it makes sense to be sensitive to the distinction between the audience and the addressees of the text, which in this context are not precisely the same group. The *Pall Mall Gazette*, founded in 1865 as a digest of news for

London gentlemen, remained for most of its history a conservative leaning paper. Under Stead's editorship it had moved to espouse social justice and radical causes. It remained, however, a paper of the urban well to do gentleman. Thus, the language of fear (Stedman-Jones 1984) used by Stead, the use of the mob, and cryptic references to political figures in the text, cues us to understand the proposed addressee of the story as the cognoscenti. London's wealthy elite would have understood the direct threat posed to the public image of the monarchy and statesmen in the event that Stead made good on his threat to reveal patrons of West End brothels (Walkowitz 1988). In this sense Stead is speaking *less* to the public than *through* them. The mass 'public' are, then, less the audience than the medium of expression, an integral part of the text and the means of its communication.

Moreover, *The Notice to Our Readers*: a frank warning which appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on July 4th 1885, makes it clear whom Stead regarded as his audience and whom he did not.

> Therefore we say quite frankly to-day that all those who are squeamish, and all those who are prudish, and all those who prefer to live in a fool's paradise of imaginary innocence and purity, selfishly oblivious to the horrible realities which torment those whose lives are passed in the London Inferno, will do well not to read the Pall Mall Gazette of Monday and the three following days (Stead 1885).

Clearly such a warning is as much an incitement as an invitation, but with it Stead imagines his audience as the 'right thinking' members of the public. Reading *The Maiden Tribute* becomes an exercise in public responsibility, demonstrating the reader's political credibility as much as it slakes his curiosity. Readership, then, becomes a form of participation in political culture, not through the provision of information, but through membership of the 'elect'.

Thus the nature of the audience assembled by and around the text is one which is multiple and fluid in nature. The roles played by the addressees are clearly of a different nature to that of the 'audience' strictly defined. Given this, it is again clear that contestation snakes through the relations between elements in the system, undermining any stable identity which could be attributed to them. The simultaneous demonisation and sentimentalisation of the poor in *The Maiden Tribute* reflects their representation in bourgeois culture, as objects and recipients, deserving or otherwise, of middle-class philanthropy. However, that the poor were the victims of this portrayal does not mean that they were the primary targets. As with the portrayal of the audience as a mob, they were a tactic in a wider class based conflict, between the emergent bourgeois mercantile class and the landed aristocracy, to which we now turn.

Stability through the Notion of Power

The *key* stabilising factor in descriptions of systems of political communication is the nature of the political. In the schema proposed by Blumler and Gurevitch this takes the form of the roles played by politicians. These are described in terms of the roles of 'gladiator' 'rational persuader' 'entertainer' and 'information provider' (1995: 15) and exist in a relation of complementarity to the overall configuration of the media system. However the immediate problem in operationalising this schema in this context concerns the nature and identity of the political and political actors. The model requires, and pre-supposes, that the political realm is something that can clearly be identified within social life, and which retains its identity throughout historical transformations. This idea is one which the example of *The Maiden Tribute* throws into doubt.

In the first instance, there is the rather obvious problem that the roles played by formal political actors in the drama were essentially bit-parts and cameos. Formal institutions of power, onto which the media of the 1880s faced, were relatively weak during this period. The caretaker government of Lord Salisbury was politically enfeebled, recent electoral reforms (1883-5) had reconfigured the political landscape in some respects, and, as Stearns has noted, these years proved fertile for the development of global political actors, especially those tied to reform (Stearns 2005, 39). Thus the identification of politicians and power per se is shaky at best.

Secondly, the nature of 'political issues' is not a given, something which the period under review demonstrates admirably. It is not for nothing that David Cannadine (1990) referred to the 1880s as a 'troubled decade'. Although it is common to read the Victorian era as a transition from the territorial power of the landed aristocracy to the more fluid capital power of the bourgeois class, this was not an easy or rapid transition. The landed classes may have been doomed but they 'took an unconscionable time a-dying' (Ibid, 25). The 1880s, however, are regarded as something of a turning point in the reconfiguration of social and political power in Britain. This period of formal flux in political life was accompanied and underwritten by transformations in the nature of what was to be considered as political and what we see here is the politicisation of morality.

That morality becomes available for political contestation occurs as a result of a number of factors. In part it can be seen as a result of the collapse of prior anchors of moral discourse, in particular the ambiguous role of formal institutions of religion in social life. However it is also partly a result of the moral entrepreneurialism of the mercantile class, whose constructions of the working classes as beleaguered immoral denizens of the labyrinth *The Maiden Tribute* recapitulates.

The Victorian middle class had made philanthropy and public morality their unique province, intervening to alleviate the social and economic impact of rapid industrialisation through widespread philanthropy. Such was the ostentation and flamboyance of these public good works that many have seen them as a mere exercise in public relations. For the historian Eric Hobsbawm philanthropy 'retrospectively softened the public outlines of men whose workers and business rivals remembered them as merciless predators' (Hobsbawm 1989, 187). However, it is also the case that philanthropy became, for many Victorian middle class urbanites, something close to a competitive sport, as viciously satirised in Dickens' portrayal of Mrs Jellyby and Mrs Pardiggle, the tireless and timesome paragons of public virtue in Bleak House. Public philanthropy came to occupy this position within late Victorian cultural life in part as a result of the ongoing dislocation of formal structures of power and privilege. As Hobsbawm (1989) and Cannadine (1990) have separately argued, one of the chief problems facing the Victorian 'in-crowd' was establishing a means of recognition in a radically altered social landscape where title and breeding were no longer a guide to social status. Public good works served nicely as one index of such status.

However, philanthropy was far outstripped as an index of social prestige by a recent addition to the field, education (Hobsbawm 1989, 165-91). Education became the chief means of training new members of the elite and a rite of initiation into the beau monde. This set the seal on the identity of the middle classes as progressive, enlightened, philanthropic and educated. It is precisely this self-image that, as Boyce (1978) has argued, formed the root of a certain kind of discourse of public opinion and the Fourth Estate that, in time, comes to be naturalised as the proper function of the press. Hampton's survey of newspapers of the mid to late Victorian era also confirms the rise to dominance of an educational ideal in the press (Hampton 2001).

It is against the background of these cultural shifts that we need to understand *The Maiden Tribute*. The concerns Stead raised were profoundly inflected by class based conflict around morality. The concern for instance with knowledge, even unpalatable truth, as an end in itself, against which refusal of knowledge appeared as a 'fool's paradise' and a selfish oblivion (Stead 1885) was grounded in this social milieu, as was the construction of childhood as a space of innocence cruelly perverted.

By contrast, aristocratic grandees had little cultural capital in the field of morality. Their strength lay precisely in what was denied by the bourgeois culture of the late Victorian elite, in tradition (as opposed to progress), deference (as opposed to self elevation), in the old traditions of service against which the will of the mass, anarchy and mobocracy were to be understood as the only alternatives. It is, then, not co-incidence that Stead's use of the imagery of the mob is so compellingly

highlighted (see above). The classical allusions upon which *The Maiden Tribute* is constructed, with references to the labyrinth, the Cretan market, the rape of Lucrece, and so forth were designed to draw attention to the archaic world of titled privilege and the foul underpinnings of the same in the sacrifice of the innocent.

Shifting the terrain of political engagement to morality threw open relationships between actors in the system for re-interpretation and reconfiguration. Whereas in the early 19th Century, the triumvirate of media, power and the public faced directly onto each other, the deterritorialisation of the political produced a systematic asymmetry between these elements. On the one hand, in the early 19th Century the media, in the form of the provincial press, were literally a mediation between power, the office of the Prime Minister and his close coterie, and the public, in this case members of parliament and the power elite. This system was structured by a close relationship between forms of power, the media, the public and the issues which are fundamental to the operation of power. As Colin Sparks puts it:

> In its contemporary usage, the public sphere concerns debates about the nature, legitimacy, scope and direction of public power. It assumes, not the democratic right to control power, but the existence of that power as a public matter (1998, 121).

In this sense the early 19th Century triumvirate saw the media and the public facing directly onto power and the issues of the day. However, on the other hand, the reinscription of the sphere of morality as a political sphere fundamentally disrupted this dynamic, and there was no longer such a close relationship between the elements of the system.

Conclusion
The above discussion has demonstrated the perils attendant on the use of historical perspectives as a resource for comparison in media studies. The coming of new media, in combination with the inherent tendency within media industries, and thus within academic perspectives, to applaud the new and novel has acted directly to impoverish debate within media history. In particular the necessity to survey media with an eye to comparison has lead to a polarisation of positions in which etymological and conceptual disputes become central.

It is in this context that the work of Blumler and Gurevitch is invoked, not as an attack upon these authors specifically, but upon the assumptions which are incorporated in comparative accounts. The approach generated by Blumler and Gurevitch was explicitly intended to circumvent the problems posed by conceptual

dispersion (1995b, 5). For the authors the chief failings of prior perspectives on the media as a political force had been the fragmentation of actors and topics implied by the more Lasswellian and Lazarsfeldian approaches which reduced complex interactions into variables which were seen as too disjointed to capture the nature of media power. However, the reification and essentialisation of categories implied in Blumer and Gurevitch's analysis limits the capacity of their system to adequately provide for such comparison. The substitution of activity (viewing, voting) for participation, of political action for power, and media personnel for mediation more generally, imposes a set of relevant categories which by this means acquire a homeostatic character which the historical record cannot support. At the same time, such a reification harrows the ground for the schismatic and neologistic accounts proposed in relation to new media.

In contrast, the study of media history requires a refusal of these prior categories. In understanding the 'system' as a contingent assemblage rather than a sine qua non, we are obliged to deconstruct these elements and investigate their relations empirically rather than as logical necessities. The case of Stead and *The Maiden Tribute* demonstrates that these elements, far from being a stable resource for analysis are the very stuff of contestation, the axes around which media power and media history develop. The irony is that the alleged revolution of new media, argued to be overturning and confronting stale orthodoxy, has produced only a craven attachment to unchallenged and unexpurgated constructions. More ironic still then that it is in the study of history that we find the resources to confront the same.

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