

How were Victorian local newspaper readers influenced by what they read?

Andrew Hobbs, University of Central Lancashire

ajhobbs@uclan.ac.uk

This paper examines theories of media sociology in the light of evidence from Victorian local newspaper readers, to suggest that readers related to other readers and to other inhabitants of their locality, rather than to local publications.

While there is concrete evidence that some behaviour was affected by the content of the Victorian local press, such clear influence is probably not representative. The connection between what journalists wrote, and how readers responded, was usually much looser. Analysis of readers' letters to newspapers in Preston, Lancashire in the second half of the 19th century found that readers responded more readily to other actors in their locality, or to other readers, than to the traditionally accepted repository of newspaper opinion, the leader column.¹

Stanley Fish's theory of 'interpretive communities' is developed to enable reading to be put into *place*, a category often neglected in the history and theorisation of reading.² The concept of interpretive communities helps us to understand the nature of 19th-century local newspapers: how they were expressions of communities such as Nonconformism, how political techniques such as 'kite-flying' could be seen as gentle repositioning of frames or interpretive strategies, how the serial nature of newspapers enabled repetition of frames, and the building of trust or 'source credibility', how their interactive nature made interpretive communities dynamic and historically and

¹ R. Scollon, *Mediated Discourse As Social Interaction: a Study of News Discourse*. (Longman. Harlow 1998), pp.ix, 75.

² ; S.E.Fish, 'Interpreting the *Variorum*,' *Critical Inquiry*. Vol.2. 3. 1976.

geographically specific, and how tropes such as oppositional journalism could bind communities of readers together.

Other reader evidence shows that the local press confirmed readers' attitudes rather than changing them, following James Carey.³ Little reader evidence was found in support of theories that local print culture created or developed an 'imagined community', suggesting that Benedict Anderson's theory may only have value where communities and identities are seriously threatened or disputed.⁴

³ J. Carey, *Communication As Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. (Routledge. 1989), p.20.

⁴ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (Verso. London 2006), pp.35-36.