

8 Where have all the readers gone? Popular newspapers and Britain's political health

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Britain's newspapers are often regarded as a blot on the country's political landscape. Two main charges are frequently levied. The first, and more traditional one, is that they have an undue influence on how people vote. The second, more recent, claim is that their negative, if not indeed increasingly cynical, coverage of politics has helped to undermine trust in politicians, and thus in turn discouraged people from voting at all.

Britain has long had a highly partisan national newspaper industry (Seymour-Ure, 1996), in contrast, for example, to the United States. Many newspapers ally themselves with one political party or the other. Thus, for example, the *Daily Mirror* has long been a consistent supporter of the Labour Party while *The Daily Telegraph* is sometimes regarded as the house journal of the Conservative Party. A newspaper's stance is most obviously revealed in its leader columns, but is certainly not confined to there. Its political outlook can also affect which stories are given prominence and how they are reported. Thus someone who regularly reads one particular newspaper is liable to be exposed to a slant on events that could be expected to encourage them to vote for one party rather than another.

Not only are British newspapers partisan, but traditionally more of them have favoured the Conservative Party rather than Labour (while since the demise of the *News Chronicle* in 1960 there has not been any newspaper at all consistently linked with the Liberals or Liberal Democrats). As a result many members of the Labour Party have long felt that the Conservative Party had an unfair advantage at election time (Miller, 1991). This concern reached its height in 1992 when in that year's election *The Sun* newspaper produced some highly unflattering coverage of Labour's election campaign and the party's leader, Neil Kinnock. When the Conservatives secured an unexpected victory, *The Sun* itself famously exclaimed "It's *The Sun* wot won it" (Harrop and Scammell, 1992).

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Whether it actually did is in truth doubtful (Curtice and Semetko, 1994). In any event, the decline in the Conservatives' fortunes after the 1992 election, was matched by a decline in its support amongst newspapers, a number of which, including *The Sun* itself, switched their backing to Tony Blair's New Labour Party (Scammell and Harrop, 1997). Whether the newspapers' switch helped bring Labour many votes is, however, far from clear (Curtice, 1997). It was, perhaps, more obviously evidence that newspapers feared losing readers unless they switched to the horse that many of their readers were already backing (Norris *et al.*, 1999).

The first charge against newspapers is essentially a concern about their tendency to criticise one party while praising another. The second, in contrast, argues that the problem with newspapers is that they are critical of all politicians. Instead of reporting what politicians say and do, it is argued that journalists increasingly interpret politicians' words and actions, and do so through a cynical frame of reference. Thus, for example, if a chancellor introduces a tax cut, this may be reported as an attempt to bribe voters. If a prime minister pays a visit to the United States, it may well be considered an attempt to deflect public attention from political difficulties at home. Meanwhile, it is also argued that journalists increasingly exhibit an unnecessary and unhealthy interest in alleged improprieties in the financial and personal affairs of politicians, an interest that reached its height in the allegations of 'sleaze' that surrounded the 1992–1997 Conservative government. Such coverage, it is claimed, produces an increasingly cynical and alienated electorate that opts not to go to the polls at all (Patterson, 1993; Franklin, 1997; Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Barnett, 2002; Lloyd, 2004).

Despite the obvious differences between these two sets of charges, they have one thing in common. They both assume that newspapers influence relatively large numbers of voters. For if newspapers influence their readers but their readership is small, they will inevitably influence insufficient people to make much difference to the overall outcome of an election amongst the population in general.

This, perhaps, suggests that Britain's democracy might be healthier if fewer people read newspapers. Yet it can be argued that newspapers have an important contribution to make to the health of the nation's democracy. It is often argued that a more informed electorate is better able to participate effectively in the political process, not least in deciding how to vote (Bartels, 1996; Christin *et al.*, 2002; Luskin *et al.*, 2002). While voters usually report that television, not newspapers, is their single most important source of information about politics, newspapers are able to cover political stories in greater depth than can any television news bulletin. Meanwhile, more popular newspapers can perhaps attract the attention of those with less interest in politics who are unlikely to watch a half-hour news bulletin but who do buy a popular newspaper for its human interest stories and then come across its political content, too. In short, newspapers could have an important role to play both in producing a more informed electorate and in helping politicians to reach out to those who might not otherwise pay much attention to them.

So, understanding how many people read newspapers, and who, is central to an adequate understanding of the relationship between newspapers and politics in Britain. It is indeed perhaps more fundamental than the question that is more commonly asked, that is, whether newspapers influence the political views and behaviour of their readers. In this chapter we examine the trends in newspaper readership over the last two decades. We consider both the overall incidence of newspaper readership and the kind of person who reads a newspaper. Our aim is to establish the possible implications of these for the health of Britain's democracy.

Trends in newspaper readership

Every year since the first survey in 1983, the *British Social Attitudes* survey has asked respondents about their newspaper readership. We ask:

*Do you normally read any daily **morning** newspaper at least three days a week?*

The question thus focuses on regular rather than occasional newspaper reading. This means our question concentrates on those people for whom the character of their newspaper might plausibly make a difference to their views or behaviour. Moreover, those who say they do read a newspaper at least three times a week are subsequently asked which one they read (or if more than one, which paper they read most often). This means we can, for example, distinguish those who read more popular newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* or the *Daily Mirror* from those who read so-called 'quality' newspapers such as the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*.

Table 8.1 Trends in newspaper readership, 1983–2006

% say read morning newspaper "at least three days a week"	1983	1986	1990	1994	1998	2002	2006
All newspapers	77	73	68	61	57	54	50
Type of newspaper							
Popular	57	50	47	46	42	37	33
Quality	10	11	11	11	11	12	12
<i>Base</i>	<i>1761</i>	<i>3100</i>	<i>2797</i>	<i>3662</i>	<i>3146</i>	<i>3435</i>	<i>4290</i>

Table 8.1 shows the trends between 1983 and 2006 both in the proportion of people who read any kind of morning newspaper regularly, and, more specifically, in the proportion who read a popular or quality newspaper.¹ It shows a clear and dramatic picture. In 1983 just over three-quarters of the adult population in Britain regularly read a daily paper. Now that figure has fallen to just half. The decline has been continuous and relentless. Collectively Britain's

newspapers have lost a third of their readers and, instead of reaching the overwhelming majority of the population, are now regularly ignored by around half. This decline is indeed one of the more remarkable and persistent changes over the last 20 years to have been charted by the *British Social Attitudes* survey.

Not all newspapers have suffered equally, however. Readership of quality newspapers has maintained its share of around a tenth of the population. The overall decline in newspaper readership has in effect been a decline in the readership of (once) popular newspapers. In 1983 well over half said they read one of the nation's popular daily papers. Now just over one third do so. Not so much a case of '*The Sun* wot won it' as '*The Sun* wot's been binned'.

In fact, even the figures for quality newspapers are not as comforting for that section of the industry as they might initially seem. As we might anticipate, the more educational qualifications someone has, the more likely it is that they read a quality newspaper. Thus, for example, as the next table shows, in 1983 no less than half of graduates said that they regularly read a quality newspaper, while just three per cent of those without any qualifications did so. Meanwhile, since 1983, the proportion of graduates in the population has grown. They comprised just seven per cent of respondents to our 1983 survey but no less than 17 per cent in our 2006 survey. It seems that there ought, then, to have been a substantial increase in the readership of quality newspapers.

The next table shows why this has not happened. Whereas in 1983 half of graduates regularly read a quality newspaper, now just one fifth do so. There have also been smaller falls in readership of quality newspapers amongst those with higher education below degree level and those whose highest qualification is an A-level or its equivalent. In other words, quality newspapers have experienced a precipitate decline in their ability to penetrate what previously had appeared to be their 'natural' market. Looked at from that perspective the plight of quality newspapers appears to be as bad as that of their more popular counterparts.

Table 8.2 Readership of quality newspapers, by highest educational qualification, 1986, 1996 and 2006²

% say read quality morning newspaper "at least three days a week"	1986	1996	2006	Change 1986–2006
All	10	10	12	+2
Highest educational qualification				
Degree	50	36	20	-30
Other higher education	17	17	13	-4
A-level	18	12	11	-7
O-level	8	5	7	-1
CSE	3	3	7	+4
None	3	3	4	+1

As we have already noted, newspapers have long since had to compete with television for people's attention. Yet the advent of television predates 1983, and thus it is not immediately obvious that the decline in newspaper readership since then has been occasioned by competition from that quarter. More recently a new development in information technology, the advent of the internet, has provided yet another potential source of competition, at least for newspapers in their conventional printed form. In fact, the industry has embraced the internet by developing their own websites, using them to make available not simply an electronic version of their printed pages but also a continuous news service (thereby overcoming one of the disadvantages of newspapers as compared with the broadcast media) together with additional background material for which there is insufficient space in the printed version. But it is not clear that this development has had much impact on the reach of newspapers. When, in our most recent survey we asked those who do not read a newspaper regularly whether they consult a newspaper website at least three times a week, only three per cent said that they do.

Who has stopped reading newspapers?

So who has stopped reading a newspaper? The first question in which we are particularly interested here is whether there is any evidence that the decline in newspaper readership is a generational phenomenon. Older people may have acquired the newspaper reading habit many years ago when there were indeed fewer alternative sources of news or entertainment. But as they die out, they may be being replaced by younger people who have not acquired that same habit, perhaps indeed because of the wider range of sources of information that was available when they were growing up. If so, then perhaps the impact of technological development ranging from television to the internet has been a delayed one.

Table 8.3 enables us to consider this possibility. It shows for the years 1986, 1996 and 2006 the proportion of people in each of seven age groups who said that they regularly read a newspaper. Each of these three years is, of course, 10 years apart. At the same time, each of our age groups spans 10 years. This means that, for example, the group of people aged 18–27 in 1986 is the same group as those aged 28–37 in 1996 – and those who were 38–47 in 2006.³ In other words, by reading diagonally across the table we can see whether those who belong to a particular generation or cohort have changed their newspaper reading habits over time. At the same time, by reading across the rows of the table, we can see whether later generations of, say, 18–27 year olds, are as likely to read newspapers as previous generations were 10 or 20 years previously. The final two columns of the table show both the age group and the cohort trends between 1986 and 2006.

Table 8.3 Newspaper readership, by age, 1986, 1996 and 2006⁴

Age	% say read a daily morning newspaper at least three days a week			Difference 1986–2006	
	1986	1996	2006	Age group	Cohort
18–27	72	51	42	-30	–
28–37	69	51	42	-27	–
38–47	75	55	42	-33	-30
48–57	75	64	52	-23	-17
58–67	79	69	62	-17	-13
68–77	71	72	63	-8	-12
78+	53	59	62	+9	(-17)
All	73	59	50	-23	

One conclusion does immediately emerge from the table. The decline in newspaper readership is not just a generational phenomenon. For example, reading diagonally, we see that those who belong to the cohort that was already aged 48–57 in 1986 (and who were aged 68–77 in 2006) were 12 percentage points less likely to be regularly reading a newspaper in 2006 than they were in 1986. However, this 12-point drop is little more than half the decline in newspaper readership amongst adults as a whole. Meanwhile, there is some evidence both that more recent generations of adults are less likely to read a newspaper regularly than their predecessors and that the decline in newspaper readership may have been stronger amongst more recent generations. Thus, for example, reading across the table, we can see that those aged 18–27 in 2006 are a full 30 percentage points less likely to read a newspaper than were those who were this age 20 years ago. Equally, the decline in newspaper readership amongst the cohort who were aged 18–27, 20 years ago (and who are now aged 38–47) has been no less than 30 percentage points. As a result there is now a twenty percentage point difference between the level of newspaper readership amongst younger groups and that amongst older ones, whereas two decades ago there was no consistent evidence of an age gap at all.

So, in part, newspapers have failed to keep older readers who once were loyal to them. But at the same time they have apparently found it more difficult to recruit and retain younger readers, perhaps because of their exposure at an early age to a wider range of media and sources of information and entertainment. This has an obvious but important implication. Even if newspapers can halt the decline in their reach amongst their older more established readers, a further decline in their level of readership amongst adults as a whole still seems inevitable in the future. Regularly reading a daily morning newspaper is, it seems, destined to become a minority pastime.

There is, however, a second question about the pattern of decline in newspaper readership that we should consider. We argued earlier that one of the ways in which newspapers might perform a useful contribution to the health of our

democracy is by ensuring that those with relatively little interest in politics come across some news and information about politics even though they primarily value their newspaper for its human interest or entertainment content. But they can only perform this role if newspapers are actually read by those with relatively little interest in politics. We should thus consider whether they are – or whether the decline in newspaper readership has been particularly marked amongst those with little interest in politics.

Before doing so, however, we should dismiss one apparently obvious explanation of the decline in newspaper readership, that is, that fewer people are interested in politics. As has been demonstrated in previous *Reports* in this series (see, for example, Curtice *et al.*, 2006), there is no consistent evidence that the public has become less interested in politics. For example, in the 1986 *British Social Attitudes* survey, 29 per cent said they had “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of interest in politics, a view expressed by 31 per cent in 1996 and no less than 35 per cent in 2006. It is no more easy or difficult now to secure people's interest in matters political than it was two decades ago.

The first part of the next table shows the proportion of people who regularly read a newspaper depending on how much interest they say they have in politics. It presents this information for each of the years 1986, 1996 and 2006.

Table 8.4 Newspaper readership, by interest in politics, 1986, 1996 and 2006⁵

% say read a morning newspaper at least three days a week	Interest in politics	1986	1996	2006	Change 1986–2006
All morning newspapers	Great deal	89	68	74	-15
	Quite a lot	74	64	60	-14
	Some	75	60	50	-25
	Not very much	68	54	34	-34
	None at all	69	46	40	-29
Quality newspapers	Great deal	31	27	29	-2
	Quite a lot	15	20	22	+7
	Some	9	8	8	-1
	Not very much	4	3	6	+2
	None at all	3	2	2	-1
Popular newspapers	Great deal	39	34	38	-1
	Quite a lot	47	39	31	-16
	Some	55	47	38	-17
	Not very much	57	48	24	-33
	None at all	58	42	32	-26

As we might expect, those who are interested in politics have always been rather more likely to say that they read a newspaper. In 1986 those who said they had a great deal of interest in politics were 20 percentage points more likely than those with no interest at all in politics to be a regular reader of a daily newspaper. Even so, the industry still captured the regular attention of over two-thirds of those with little or no interest in politics, and thus was a potential conduit through which information about politics might reach those who were least inclined to seek out such information for themselves.

Its ability to do so has, however, sharply declined. The decline in newspaper readership has been heaviest most of all amongst those with the least interest in politics. Amongst those with a great deal or quite a lot of interest in politics, the decline in newspaper readership over the last 20 years has been of the order of 15 percentage points; in contrast amongst those with little or no interest it has been of the order of 30 percentage points.

Moreover, as we can see from the second and third parts of the same table, which repeat the analysis separately for quality and popular newspapers, this decline in newspaper readership amongst those with little or no interest in politics has been occasioned entirely by a decline in popular newspaper readership amongst this group. Twenty years ago, someone with little or no interest in politics was actually more likely to read a popular newspaper than was someone *with* an interest in politics. Now they are no more likely to do so. Even the popular press is now as likely to be addressing the politically attuned, as it is those who usually tune out of politics.

A cynical readership?

We remarked at the beginning of this chapter that the press is often criticised for its apparently cynical coverage of politics, a cynicism that it is argued has helped to stimulate distrust in politicians. There is indeed no doubt that distrust of politicians has increased. For example, in 1986, 38 per cent said that they trusted governments of any party “to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party”, a proportion that had fallen to just 22 per cent by 1996 and is now no more than 19 per cent (for a more extended discussion see Curtice and Seyd, 2003; Bromley *et al.*, 2004). What is less clear is whether newspapers are responsible for this change (see also Bromley and Curtice, 2004).

If indeed newspapers are making their readers increasingly cynical, then we might anticipate that over time those who read newspapers should become increasingly different from those who do not in their level of cynicism about politics. Those who regularly read the diatribes of the ‘Daily Scandal’ should be increasingly relatively more cynical about politics. Moreover, of course, any difference between the attitudes of those who read newspapers and those who do not would be further exacerbated if dislike of the alleged cynicism of the political coverage of newspapers is one of the reasons why some people have stopped reading a newspaper.

Table 8.5 Newspaper readership, by trust in government, 1986, 1996 and 2006⁶

% say read a morning newspaper at least three days a week	1986	1996	2006	Change 1986–2006
Trusts governments to put interests of nation before party				
Almost always/most of the time	76	65	56	-20
Some of the time	73	55	47	-26
Almost never/never	68	58	53	-15

Table 8.6 Newspaper readership, by trust in politicians, 1986, 1996 and 2005⁶

% say read a morning newspaper at least three days a week	1986	1996	2005	Change 1986–2005
MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly				
Strongly agree	71	60	53	-18
Agree	73	60	50	-23
Neither agree nor disagree	75	46	50	-15
Disagree/strongly disagree	78	59	50	-28

Of these possibilities, however, there is no sign. Tables 8.5 and 8.6 show, for each of three years, how the proportion of people who read a newspaper varies according to the degree of trust and cynicism about politics. Their trust and cynicism is measured by two questions. The first is the question to which we have already referred about whether governments can be trusted to put the needs of the nation first. The second asks respondents to the survey whether they agree or disagree that “Generally speaking those we elect as MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly”. If newspapers are increasingly making their readers more cynical about politics, or alternatively if dislike of newspapers’ cynical coverage of politics helps explain why people are now less likely to read them, we should find that the difference in the level of newspaper readership between the more and less cynical has widened.

Of this, however, there is no consistent evidence. True, the decline in newspaper readership appears to have been greatest amongst those who do not feel that MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly (and thus may be regarded as least cynical). But at the same time it has fallen least amongst those who are least trustful of governments. Overall, how distrustful or cynical someone was about politics made relatively little difference in 1986 to the chances that they were a newspaper reader, and much the same is true now.

Conclusions

Readership of Britain's daily morning newspapers has declined sharply over the last 20 years, a decline that seems set to continue yet further. In particular, the country's so called 'popular' newspapers are now a lot less popular than they once were. But even the ability of the quality press to maintain its overall level of readership also looks unimpressive given the increase in the number of graduates in the population over the last 20 years.

It could be argued that this is healthy for Britain's democracy. It means that the ability of newspapers unfairly and unaccountably to sway the outcome of an election, as *The Sun* allegedly did in 1992, is now much diminished. It also means that fewer people are exposed to their supposedly cynical coverage of politics that discourages people from participating in politics at all.

But this seems too dismissive a picture. Popular newspapers were once a mechanism whereby information about politics could reach those with little inclination to follow political matters. Now they are increasingly unable to fulfil that role. Instead, the readership of newspapers in Britain is increasingly confined to those with an interest in politics. For years politicians have worried about the power of the press. But perhaps instead it is time for them to be concerned about its weakness.

Notes

1. Those reading a regional or local daily morning paper are included in the 'all papers' column but do not appear in either the 'popular' or 'quality' papers columns. The newspapers defined as 'quality' newspapers are: *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, *The Financial Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Independent*. The newspapers defined as 'popular' are: *Daily Express*, *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Record*, *Daily Star*, *Morning Star*, *The Sun*, *Today*.
2. The bases for Table 8.2 are as follows:

% say read quality morning newspaper "at least three days a week"	1986	1996	2006
All	3100	3662	4290
Highest educational qualification			
<i>Degree</i>	207	394	738
<i>Other higher education</i>	370	517	519
<i>A-level</i>	268	431	640
<i>O-level</i>	578	720	800
<i>CSE</i>	251	337	415
<i>None</i>	1394	1187	1091

3. Since the *British Social Attitudes* survey is not a panel study, the groups do not comprise the same *respondents*, but the respondents are drawn from the same groups in the population.
4. The bases for Table 8.3 are as follows:

% say read a daily morning newspaper at least three days a week			
Age	1986	1996	2006
18–27	582	473	512
28–37	608	812	762
38–47	578	621	824
48–57	508	527	675
58–67	414	451	691
68–77	288	468	506
78+	119	253	315
All	3100	3662	4290

5. The bases for Table 8.4 are as follows:

% say read morning newspaper at least three days a week	1986	1996	2006
Interest in politics			
<i>Great deal</i>	111	338	107
<i>Quite a lot</i>	331	803	266
<i>Some</i>	491	1189	361
<i>Not very much</i>	421	917	224
<i>None at all</i>	188	414	119

6. The bases for Tables 8.5 and 8.6 are:

% say read a morning newspaper at least three days a week	1986	1996	2006
Trusts governments to put interests of nation before party			
<i>Almost always/most of the time</i>	589	259	203
<i>Some of the time</i>	708	615	491
<i>Almost never/never</i>	173	269	362
MPs lose touch with people pretty quickly			
<i>Strongly agree</i>	254	304	503
<i>Agree</i>	826	589	1714
<i>Neither agree nor disagree</i>	166	127	462
<i>Disagree/strongly disagree</i>	244	129	423

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