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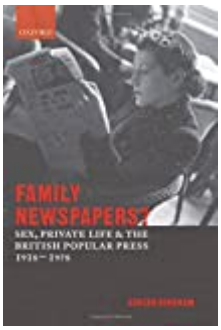

Adrian Bingham. *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press 1918-1978.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. 298 pp. $99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-927958-6.

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Sex, Scandal, and the Popular Press in Britain

Among my colleagues, I am one of the few who still subscribes to a daily newspaper, and am in an even smaller minority in privileging my local paper, the *Washington Post*, over the *New York Times.* One of the principal reasons for reading the *Post*, as all good Washingtonians know, is the Style Section–the paperâs daily dose of political and celebrity gossip, relationship advice, and horoscopes, and easily the most entertaining part of the paper. Being the type of person who reads the gossip and advice columns before the ârealâ news predisposed me to enjoy *Family Newspapers: Sex, Private Life and the British Popular Press 1918-1978*, as the book is, on one level, a compendium of historical press gossip and sex talk. My own experience writing press history further heightened my appreciation of this impressive book. *Family Newspapers* demonstrates Adrian Binghamâs wide mastery of sixty years of sex and celebrity reporting in a series of popular newspapers, including most prominently the *Daily Express*, the *Daily Mirror*, the *News of the World*, the *Sunday Pictorial*, and the *Sun.* While the archives of the *Express* and the *Mirror* have recently been digitized and made available through subscription, the rest of these papers are neither digitized nor indexed, and are difficult to locate outside of the British Library newspaper archive in North London.

While Bingham likely stored up much of the material on the interwar period while he was researching his first book, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Interwar Britain* (2004), the project still represents a labor of love on the part of the author. From a scholarly perspective, the best moments of the book are those that show the payoff of all that labor at the archival coalface, as when Bingham notes that âmost scholars have not fully recognized the significance of the *Mirror*âs support for Wolfenden, because they have concentrated instead on the anti-homosexual prejudice of the paperâs editorial director, Hugh Cudlippâ (p. 188). Such revelations are reminiscent of his earlier discovery that Lord Rothermereâs *Daily Mail* was the exception to the rule, and the whole of the popular press was not antagonistic to granting young women the vote in 1928. Both broaden our understanding of popular culture and demonstrate the importance of

due diligence in writing about a subject as complex and often contradictory as the popular press.

Broadly, in *Family Newspapers*, Bingham argues that, during the sixty years surveyed, the British popular newspapers sought to tread a fine line between offering the titillation and entertainment that the public seemingly demanded and respecting their own self-conception as âfamily newspapers,â which would not offend or corrupt women or younger readers and which neither encouraged nor condoned behavior deemed to be socially inappropriate. Of course, as definitions of âdecencyâ and âmorality,â and the boundaries between what was considered to be fair game for public discussion and what was seen as remaining in the private realm, shifted, so too did the fine line walked by the press. Whereas, in 1921, the *Mirror* told Mary Stopes that they had not reported on the opening of her first birth control clinic in Holloway because it considered the subject âinappropriate for discussion or publicity,â in August 1975 the paper saw fit to publish âThe Mirror Guide to Sexual Knowledge,â detailing, among other things, the ins and outs of different contraceptive methods (p. 56). Similarly, whereas the popular press shied away from discussion of âinvertsâ in the 1920s, and was violently condemnatory of âqueersâ or âpervertsâ in the 1950s, by the 1970s, the attitude of most journals was that society ought to take a live and let live approach to homosexuality.

Previous scholars have focused on the 1960s as the key turning point in the mediaâs treatment of sexuality, as a consequence of changing the censorship law. While this may be true of film, television, or popular literature, Bingham argues, it is not true of the popular press. The key period of transition in the press was the 1940s and 1950s. First, the exigencies of war prompted newspapers to relax their taboos on the discussion of sexual health, as the government sought their assistance in curbing the spread of venereal disease. Simultaneously, newspapers used the pretext of lifting soldiersâ morale to justify the publication of more and more pretty ladies with less and less pretext that these âpin-up girlsâ held a legitimate news value. After the war, as psychological theory removed some of the stigma from sexual behavior, the emerging affluent society fostered an environment in which âthe horizons of the majority were no longer confined to the necessitiesâ (p. 12). The pursuit of sex for pleasure as well as procreation became a right to which both men and women were believed to be entitled (at least within the confines of marriage). Finally, competition from the new medium of television meant that the press had to become racier or risk losing readership. By the 1950s, the press was discussing sex in advice columns and special features, and sexualized images were ubiquitous in its pages. The press was, however, conscious of not pushing the boundaries of propriety too far, of remaining, as the editors and publishers of the day frequently described their publications, âfamily newspapers.â It was not until the 1970s, with the launch of the *Sun* and the race to the bottom that that paper engendered, that the popular press seemed to completely abandon its previous commitment to upholding the values of the âfamily newspaper.â The studyâs end date, 1978, is justified as the year in which the *Sun* overtook the *News of the World* to become the best-selling paper in Britain.

While Bingham discusses this chronology in his introduction and conclusion, the study itself is arranged thematically, with, among others, chapters on court reporting, sex surveys, moral crusades, and gossip and scandal. Although this thematic structure has its merits, allowing the reader to focus on continuity and change in the presentation of each specific issue over time, it also tends to obscure some of the broader continuities and disjunctures between, say, press attitudes toward public morality and the exploitation of the female form. Such continuities and disjunctures are frequently alluded to by parentheticals encouraging the reader to, for example, see a specific chapter. However, it might have made more sense to arrange the book chronologically, to highlight better the impact of such external events as the second-wave feminist movement, or the passage of the 1969 Divorce Act, on press coverage of sex and private lives more broadly. That said, a chronological structure would have had its drawbacks as well, and the current arrangement in no way detracts from the value of this well-written and engaging book.

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