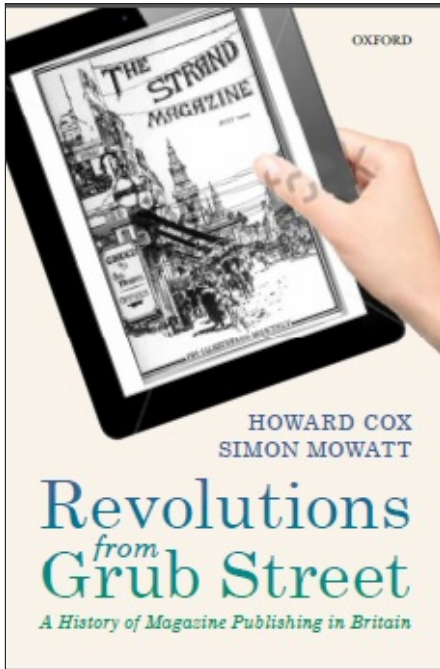




BUSINESS & LABOUR
HISTORY GROUP



“The untold story of how the British printing unions adapted to technological and organisational change: perspectives from magazine publishing”

Study Background I

- The British national newspaper story of print relations has been explored from a number of perspectives:
 - Industrial relations approaches emphasising the position and rights of unions, concerned with the politically and ideologically-driven attempts to restrict the actions of unions
 - HRM driven approaches focussed on the right of management to manage, with a rationalist view of the actions of management, emphasising the importance of employment flexibility
- This study may serve to reposition debates on print union development towards a more balanced employment relations understanding, as called for by Belnave and Mortimer (2005.)

Study Background II

- Examination of technological and organisational change in the magazine industry from 1600-2010 (Cox and Mowatt 2014)
- Print labour relations a crucial element to the development of the industry
- Previous studies have focused on print industrial relations in the national newspaper industry, which although linked has given a skewed understanding of developments in the sector.

Provincial Newspapers	10%
National Newspapers	5%
General Periodicals, Trade journals, Packaging, and Books	85%

Table 2: Activity of Unionised Workers in the Print Publishing Industry, 1985 (Gennard, 1990)

Print Unions: Demarcation and Closed shops

- Craft typographical print unions long-term feature of industry, but mass unions follow large-scale stream-driven letterpress development
- Strike action significant effect on this economic model
- NGA formed in 1963 from the merger of the London Typographical Society and the Typographical Association
 - Control the skilled composition process based on Linotype machines, for example
- Unskilled work was also early following the closed-shop model formed by the Printer's Labourers' Union (PLU), later NATSOPA and SOGAT
- Chapel based union structures preferred local bargaining

Two houses alike ... Odhams and Sun Engraving

- Print relations in magazines dominated by two firms: Sun Engraving and Odhams (Watford)
 - Sun Engraving, formed in 1919 by the merger of several leading firms, emerged as the dominant inter-war magazine publisher due to its high-speed rotary gravure press
 - Contracts with Amalgamated Press, Odhams (publisher) in 1930, Condé Nast from 1937, give 70% share of magazine print market
 - Odhams attempt to buy Sun in 1937. Failing this visit Alco-Gravure Co. New York and acquire sole UK rights to Goss Gravure Presses, and build Odhams (Watford) press next to Sun, and poach print workers (Greenhill and Reynolds, 2010)
 - Odhams launch *Woman*, and Sun upgrades its presses for Newnes's *Woman's Own* contract
- The firms remain rivals in the market for the next 47 years



The Ministry for Magazines

- IPC formed in 1963, Cecil King – newspaper baron and political kingmaker - merges Mirror newspaper group and virtually all consumer magazines (Fleetway/Amalgamated Press, Newnes, Odhams)
- Monopoly – top 4 women’s weeklies alone 20% of entire market in 1977
- 1964 Southwark Offset first web-offset photocomposition plant
- Reed International ‘merger’ puts printworks in IPL Division (later IPC Printers)



The IPL Printing Crisis

- 100 chapels, IPL's print workers were members of six main unions: SOGAT and the NGA with 1,750 members each; NATSOPA with 1,650; SLADE with 650; and on the maintenance side with the AUEW and EETU having 100 members each
- "Them and us" relations
- Strict demarcation
- Constant crisis and loss-making
- 'Cameron' Court of Inquiry in 1967 over working practices and labour relations at Southwark Offset
- As late as 1972, 77 per cent of NGA members were still engaged in typesetting for letterpress printing, and letterpress and gravure dominant at IPC
- Photolithography as 'new' technology, 70% more efficient than letterpress if coupled with changes to working practices
- Union visits to German presses – 'bemused'



A Familiar Story

- Looking back from 1978 on the slow adoption of photocomposition in the UK, which lagged far behind the United States and Europe, former IPC Chairman Sir Edward Pickering pointed out simply that when it came to adopting new technologies, ‘London . . . with its unique competitive situation and its own trade union problems, is not the United States.’
- Delafons (1965) considered that the unions had successfully compelled the publishing industry ‘to retain the original 16th Century manual crafts . . . and in no other industry had the roots of ancient tradition formed so stout a barricade against any fundamental change in methods and processes’ .

IPCs Print Divestment

- 1976 attempt by IPC to merge Odhams (Watford) and Sun Printers (formerly Sun Engraving)
- Blocked by Odhams (Watford) Unions
- 1984 IPC sell the Mirror Group Newspapers to BPCCC for £113m, including Odhams (Watford) for £1.5m. The deal included a £28m contract for Odhams printworks to continue printing IPC titles
- However, BPCCC merge Odhams (Watford) with Sun Printers, and close Odhams (Watford) print plants

From “the Fleet St. Disaster” to Thatcher

- Employer-led perspectives on relations in newspaper publisher highly politicised (Cleverly, 1976).
- Conservative governments of Margaret Thatcher (1979–90) instigated a series of major changes to the structure of employment and union relations in the UK
 - Employment Acts (1980, 1982, and 1984.) The Acts prohibited secondary action, such as ‘sympathy strikes’. They limited picketing to six people in their own place of work (the 1980 Act), created restrictions to the closed shop and the ‘blacking’ of non-unionized companies, allowed employers to sue for compensation (the 1982 Act),
- Following the commencement of these changes to the law, newspaper and printing companies started to mount pressure on the printing unions with a view towards union derecognition –Messenger & Wapping

Counter-narrative Points

- Relations at Sun Printers more receptive to changes in working practices
- Alternative printing technologies emergence – BPCC's Xerox-based works, BBC contracts
- Emergence of IPC rival such as EMAP from the late 1970s
- Small publishing houses, ie. Wagadon, Dennis, based on flexible and pragmatic relations
- Post IPC print divestment large increase in number of titles

Discussion

- Questions – were the print unions irrational? The history of their sector had inured them from crisis to crisis as the asymmetric costs of printing stoppages meant that even the ultimate threat of plant closures had little influence on attitudes and policies of the unions. (Sisson, 1975)
- Unions sought to gain control of working conditions related to new technology, not oppose its introduction
- And managerial decision-making in newspaper publication was frequently irrational – ie. King's actions at IPC
- Symptomatic of UK adversarial labour relations – model of German codetermination as contrast

Conclusions

- Study shows different patterns of union attitudes to the adoption of new technology and working methods between dominant firms (Odhams and Sun), and previously ignored smaller firms
- Identifies limitations of previous studies rooted in minatory example of print sector
- Acknowledges the positive outcomes of widening industry participation beyond unionised workers in the 1990s