

Naming and Blaming: Civic Shame and Slum Journalism in Late Nineteenth-Century and Early Twentieth-Century Manchester and Birmingham

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Abstract

This study analyses slum journalism in the British provincial press and reveals that it continued to be a major theme until well into the twentieth century. Instead of the rather moralising reporting of the earlier nineteenth century, this journalism used the device of civic shame to pressurise local government into taking action on slums as a matter of public health. It examines the discourses that resulted from civic shame in two newspapers – the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* – and challenges the idea that interest in reporting local political matters decreased during this period.

Civic shame is shown to work in two ways – offering detailed vignettes of aspects of slum life based on personal observation and showing (some) slum dwellers as worthy of better living conditions; blaming the local authority directly for failing to address the problem. In this way, later slum writing sought to appeal directly to the reader in order not just to impart facts but to stimulate empathy and to develop a desire for action. Such in-depth studies of a particular social issue sought to address the local authorities directly, to apportion blame and to use slum writing as a tool for social action.

Keywords

Slum journalism; civic shame; public health; newspapers; local government

Introduction

This paper examines slum journalism produced by British newspapers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It concentrates on two major cities – Birmingham and Manchester (England’s second and third largest cities, respectively) – that were especially adversely affected by the Industrial Revolution. It extends the existing scholarship on English slum writing which has tended to focus on London. Alongside the great wealth generated by industry, the poor lived in abject conditions in these cities. Two newspapers in particular, the *Manchester Guardian* and the *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, documented slum life in detail, using the mechanism of civic shame to force local authorities to confront the problem. In this way, they sought to lead public opinion on the issue and not just reflect it, and to establish journalism as an important tool of civic action.

There is a paradox in the manner in which slums were covered in these newspapers – it is partly explained by the common, rather moralizing tone adopted by much of the nineteenth-century press reports on the lives of the poor (and which continued well into the twentieth century) and the desire to play a role in the improvement of the urban landscape which was becoming the focus of much journalistic attention. This work explores this tension and acknowledges the undoubted commercial appeal of slum reporting for readers, similar to that identified by Guarneri in the USA.¹ Newspapers were significant mediators of slums but, in so doing, they contributed to, and often reinforced, the limited mechanisms by which they were understood.

Journalism and the Slum

Journalists have long engaged with slums; indeed, it could be argued that they helped to create the ideas about slums that emerged and persisted throughout the nineteenth century. This was particularly true in the cities of the British Industrial Revolution – principally Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham. Most of this writing appeared in the context of

public health – one of the great social issues of the nineteenth century. As I have shown elsewhere, journalistic discourses on slums helped to keep slums in the minds of readers and to regularly remind them of this most intractable of social problems.² It was not uncommon for provincial newspapers to address local political issues, but this study demonstrates that they went considerably beyond acting as “noticeboards” for their communities.³ Dirt was “emphatically political” as Koven has shown and journalism provided a space where such subjects could be discussed, but in ways that were often partial and that worked to reproduce existing descriptions of slums derived from authority figures such as sanitary inspectors.⁴ The very word *slum* has been shown to be inherently “unstable” and this article aims to assess the contribution made by journalists to this variability.⁵

However, this writing about slums was often more than merely descriptive, it was also a discursive construct. While much of this took the form of “reproducing the traditional moral model of poverty” and was populated by stereotypical characters, it also went considerably beyond these and identified those who were responsible in order to press for solutions.⁶ Thus, the provincial press demonstrated the capacity to function as significant vehicles for necessary social reforms. Yet, such reporting was necessarily selective and presented to the reader in the context of the newspaper itself. Journalists visited slums as outsiders and, whatever their motives, “any assessment of social conditions must be distorted by the means taken to obtain the information.”⁷ As Connery has noted with respect to American slum writing, journalism, like sanitary inspection, was a way of seeing and inevitably changed what was observed.⁸

The reasons for this reporting of life in the slums has been variously argued to be for entertainment or shock value, to enable the creation and maintenance of narrow stereotypes about slum-dwellers and to enhance the profitability of newspapers during a time of significant commercial competition.⁹ All of these elements can be found in much slum

reporting that occurred in the nineteenth century. However, it is also the case that this writing reveals a more nuanced approach to slums, especially that which was produced in the later part of the century. While there may have been attempts to shock readers for temporary commercial gain, the articles produced on slums seem to suggest a more complex desire to create more socially-aware types of journalism that could affect genuine social change. Some journalists who wrote about slums explicitly distanced themselves from attempts to sensationalize them and their inhabitants. While this may be dismissed as somewhat self-serving rhetoric, it is also the case that much of this writing extended beyond describing social conditions in the slum and became part of the search for answers to a long-standing social challenge.

In his study of Canadian newspapers, Mackintosh has pointed out the duality at the heart of much of this slum journalism – newspapers strived to hold the powerful to account and to “slake the popular appetite” for sensational and dramatic depictions of urban life.¹⁰ In this manner, the fabric of the newspaper replicated that of the city – contradictory and paradoxical. Their desire to help with enacting social change moved uneasily alongside their commercial instincts. Similarly, Guarneri has also noticed this dual nature existing in the US press, which she referred to as a sense of “civic stewardship.”¹¹ She argues that the voyeuristic pleasures experienced by the readers actually functioned as a gateway to both commercial success and a mechanism for connecting the readers more powerfully to their city. Thus, newspapers could remind readers of their own duty to the city as citizens and their mutual responsibility for solving these problems.

Civic shame had several components – the repeated and regular apportioning of blame for the continued failures to solve the issue of the slums, the use of new reporting techniques such as novelistic and detailed descriptions of slum life and slum-dwellers designed not just to shock, but to present a visceral and vivid portrait to the reader and to

emphasize the importance of the journalist as a direct observer of this phenomenon. The feature-style reports that resulted from this were augmented by editorial comment on the social problem of the slum and by readers' letters on the subject, creating a unified narrative. It is worth remembering that the relationship between slums and journalism was a reciprocal process – while slums were able to provide ample copy that often had an intrinsic shock value for journalists, journalism also impacted on how slums were envisaged and created in the mind of the reader. The decision to print readers' letters on the subject right next to the most recent slum reports demonstrates that there was a discursive reward for investing in slum writing. A repeated defense of slum journalism was to make slums visible to readers and “they would be seen and, being seen, would attract attention and then perhaps be inquired into.”¹²

What were the implications for journalists of visiting slums in the company of officers of the government? Crook has argued that inspection was a key constituent of rationalized bureaucracy and disciplinary surveillance, part of the “liberal culture of governance”.¹³ This view was echoed by Joyce who observes that the city was often perceived as a diseased body, whose sickness needed to be cured.¹⁴ Poovey's work on a similar theme describes the existence of social problems in the slums as evidence of disease.¹⁵ These social issues threatened the pride of urban reformers such as sanitary inspectors but also the vision of the city espoused by many journalists.

In acting beside such arbiters of civic standards as sanitary inspectors, were journalists implicating themselves in their actions? It was common in slum writing for journalists to refer to themselves as “your observer” or “your investigator.” Allan has described journalists as “professional observers.”¹⁶ Observer status is a key part of witnessing, of authenticity and a guarantor to the reader of what has been observed.¹⁷ The inclusion of the word *your* emphasized the relationship between writer and reader and sought

to go beyond a mere rhetorical device. The journalist was a representative of the reader, going where he or she could not or dared not go. Thus, the nineteenth-century press acted as a “socially powerful agency.”¹⁸

The type of writing involved in reporting on slums was not purely informative, it was also interpretative.¹⁹ The blending of news and feature-writing techniques observable in much slum writing allowed the reader to imagine themselves in the situation. The use of what is presented to seem like real-life dialogue, writing in scenes and the evocation of the senses and emotions all combined to produce a powerful effect, what Harrington has termed “intimate journalism.”²⁰ It is clearly difficult to establish whether or not it was based on any kind of reality observed by the writer – reproducing such dialogue helped to offer an assurance of authenticity and was a characteristic of much slum journalism of this period but much was surely rhetorical, as Finch has remarked.²¹ Many slum dwellers anticipated the needs of outsiders such as sanitary inspectors and journalists and reacted accordingly. These authority figures were often easily identifiable, and Otter has outlined the mechanisms by which warnings were circulated within a district of their arrival.²² He does emphasize, however, that the process of inspection was usually characterized by agreement and negotiation and was not always confrontational.²³

The point of this interpretative writing was to help readers to understand and make sense of the world around them.²⁴ As we shall see, their reactions could indeed be profitable, but profit was neither guaranteed nor was it always a major priority for newspapers. This study seeks to identify to what extent slum journalism of this period ended up “entrenched in the common-sense associations upon which public knowledge was built” or whether it managed to challenge any of these assumptions with an alternative discourse.²⁵ Civic shame represented a counterpoint to civic pride which was regularly used earlier in the century to celebrate civic achievements such as the building of new town halls, art galleries

and museums and public libraries, often acclaimed unquestioningly by the local press. In fact, as Jackson has shown, the press was capable of using civic shame to promote progressive agendas later in the nineteenth century in order to advance the case for social reform.²⁶

Mayne presents slum journalism as displaying three characteristics: the use of shock to get attention, the presentation of those who occupied the slums as the 'other' and cross-references to other, often contiguous cities and towns.²⁷ While all three elements occur with varying frequency in the articles that form the basis for this study, it is also clear that there are other techniques at work that, taken together, constitute civic shame as an observable device to force municipal action.

Slum Journalism and Civic Shame

Slums were a common theme in newspapers throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. The cities chosen for this study represent not only some of England's largest cities but those which suffered most from the effects of the Industrial Revolution. The prevalence of heavy industries (and, in the case of Liverpool, its status as a port city) had created serious social and public health problems. The writer and art critic John Ruskin described Manchester as "the spiritual home of air pollution."²⁸ It was precisely their economic successes that drew increasing numbers of people to these cities in search of employment and thus helped to create slums in the first place.

From a quantitative perspective, certain patterns of increased and decreased coverage can be observed in the cities studied here. The table below sets out the coverage mapped from a keyword search for *slum* or *slums* in newspapers contained in the British Newspaper Archives for four of the most populous cities in England outside of London. The slum journalism of these cities has not received much scholarly attention compared to London but we also need to be mindful that cities such as Birmingham received comparatively less

attention than other provincial cities such as Manchester and Liverpool. This may be due to what Finch, Ameen and Salmela have described as Birmingham’s “recessive cultural position.”²⁹

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Table 1 – Mentions of the word *slum* or *slums* in local newspapers 1850-1939

City	1850s	1860s	1870s	1880s	1890s	1900s	1910s	1920s	1930s
Birmingham	17	85	98	274	202	1,122	789	767	1,435
Manchester	17	45	107	359	581	868	287	50	53
Liverpool	54	85	153	467	393	645	402	611	666
Leeds	48	104	158	333	787	1,176	863	1,304	2,641

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(Source: The British Newspaper Archive)

The patterns revealed by this table are interesting. Birmingham demonstrates the greatest increase as the city tackled slum problems later in the century than Liverpool. The latter has few mentions until the 1900s as slums were a municipal priority at an earlier stage than other cities. Two large spikes are visible in Birmingham – in the 1880s and the 1930s. Birmingham’s approach to slum clearance was haphazard – Joseph Chamberlain’s schemes of the 1870s stalled after he left the city and a more comprehensive plan was not returned to until the 1930s. This demonstrates why Birmingham’s local government during this period has been referred to as a “laggard, penny-pinching authority.”³⁰ It also explains why the word counts for Birmingham rise so sharply in the 1930s when the issue of slum clearances returned to the municipal agenda. The table data suggests that newspapers were mostly following municipal agendas with regard to slum clearances, rather than setting this agenda. When slum-clearance projects were underway, newspapers increased the extent of their writing about slums. This validates Platt’s observation that approaches to slum journalism

were often dictated by the local political culture.³¹ Manchester has a noticeable spike in the 1900s while Leeds demonstrates a large increase in interest from the 1890s until well into the twentieth century. While the small sample size is undoubtedly a factor, this also reveals that slum journalism was unevenly distributed within and between these cities, as was their individual responses to this issue. Liverpool was one of the first cities to tackle its slum problem, while Manchester took action much later.

The fact that all of these cities were provincial demonstrates the importance of extending slum scholarship beyond London. As [Finch, Ameen and Salmela](#) have remarked, such secondary cities were often “understood for what they are not” and while slums often existed on the margins of most citizen’s experiences of cities, their prevalence in cities peripheral to the nation’s capital was a significant feature.³² It may even be observed that the existence of slums in these cities was a testimony to their urban status as cities in the first place.

Qualitatively, this study has examined a series of articles on slums published in local newspapers to ascertain the journalistic values and techniques utilized to describe slums and the use of the device of civic shame to mobilize public opinion and increase pressure on the municipal authorities to respond. The study concentrates on the *Manchester Guardian* and the Birmingham *Daily Gazette* as they devoted substantial coverage to the issue of slums in the form of a series of articles on the subject. This enables patterns of coverage to be more easily detected. Both were daily newspapers, with the *Manchester Guardian* renowned for its liberal outlook under its campaigning editor Charles Prestwich Scott, while the *Daily Gazette* was conservative. Neither of these political positions seems to have prevented both papers from developing a similar attitude to slum reporting.

Manchester

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In 1870 and 1871, the *Manchester Guardian* published a series of articles on life in the city's slums. The newspaper, nominally a national paper although with a strong local bias, was renowned as a liberal voice in the city. The 1870 series ran weekly from the middle of February to the middle of March as five separate articles, all using the headline "In the Slums." The series was augmented the following year by nine articles published throughout April under the heading "The Census in the Slums" and were produced when the journalist accompanied a census enumerator into the slums. The fact that the paper returned to this theme may have been due to the popularity of the 1870 series and the opportunity offered by the census to revisit the slum areas. As was common with themed articles, they always ran on the same page of the paper, making it easier for readers to find.

The first 1870 article opened with an observation that slums were usually only featured in the newspaper in relation to the police or the courts. It continued to note that the purpose of this series was to investigate the causes of the slums and not the consequences. The theme of slums is referred to as "startling and unfamiliar" and "one not usually met with in newspaper literature."³³ Looking at the coverage of slums in Manchester newspapers in Table 1, it can be seen that the 1870s was a decade of increasing coverage, of which these articles were the beginning. The appeal of the unfamiliar was obvious for both readers and for the commercial health of the newspaper itself. This remark may also have been a mere rhetorical device used by the journalist to establish his work as offering some unique insights, which was clearly not the case as Table 1 shows. This is further reinforced as there is an attempt to offer a definition of a slum – something that rarely occurred in most slum journalism. The definition emphasizes both its otherness and its ordinariness – "that borderland which interposes between our homes and our avocations."³⁴ Presenting the slum as both core and periphery (and neither) demonstrated the active creation of a slum discourse by journalists as they helped their readers to imagine a place they may not have seen or

experienced. It simultaneously emphasized both the proximity of these places and their distance from the readers' everyday lives.

The tone of the rest of the piece was not especially moralizing but had a light touch. It commented that slums were "unknown to respectability," the latter a frequently used word in reporting on slums, as we shall see.³⁵ The article as a whole was free from the sanctimonious tone that characterized much slum writing earlier in the century but instead exhorted the public to "gather them (slum dwellers) up and care for them," thereby apportioning responsibility for slums to the whole community.³⁶ The writer emphasized that the purpose of the series was to show "as plainly and unsensationally as possible what we have seen in our wanderings."³⁷ It was common for these articles to acclaim themselves as unsensational as a counterweight against one of the most common criticisms of this kind of reporting – that its sole purpose was to exaggerate and sensationalize for profit and also to demonstrate the journalists' awareness of this type of charge. A similar point has been made about the Toronto press during the same period by Mackintosh.³⁸

Manchester had been one of the first cities in Britain to ban back-to-back housing, a feature of much of its slums in 1844 when Friedrich Engels wrote about them.³⁹ However, it had then been very slow to address the slum problem. Its first improvement scheme was not introduced until 1891, whereas neighboring cities such as Liverpool had made considerable progress throughout the 1840s and beyond. The latter had appointed Britain's first Medical Officer of Health, William Duncan, in 1847, whose role was to reform the sanitary conditions of the city.⁴⁰ Manchester's local government had worried about the expense involved in slum clearance and had hoped that local commercial developments expanding in the city would complete the work.⁴¹ This had not occurred and the city's slum problems continued to worsen.

The five articles from 1870 contained many detailed descriptions of life in the Manchester slums, including common lodging houses as well as individual homes. The final article included mention of the illness suffered by the journalist, “an illness directly traceable to his explorations of the slums” and remarked that the articles would be suspended until March 31.⁴² The series did not appear again that year either because the journalist did not recover from his illness or [because](#) he was reluctant to re-enter the slums again as a result of it.

The 1871 series was more a comprehensive nine articles published across the month of April, each focused on a different slum area of the city. These areas included Salford, Deansgate, Hulme, Ancoats and Angel Meadow

(Figure 1 here – a Manchester slum street around 1900 © KGPA Ltd/ Alamy).

The latter two areas were mostly inhabited by Irish immigrants. The opening article, published on April 3 made the purpose of the series explicit: “to investigate the conditions in which their occupants live; to seek for the means by which to ameliorate those conditions; and to strive from the national loss which much of this portion of the community entails to obtain a future national gain.”⁴³ Slums were here set in the context of the potential uses to society of the poor if their living conditions could be improved. This laudable aim was followed by a lengthy history of census-taking from Biblical times until the present which detracted somewhat from the stated purpose of the piece. The piece ended with the observation of the invisibility of the poor from the pages of the newspapers, while noting that “very great improvements” had been made in the slums since the original series of articles.⁴⁴

This was followed by seven articles, each focused on a particular district, dense with details of the sights, sounds and smells of the area and of the people living there. The type of writing used in these articles can be described as feature-style as opposed to news. All were published [on](#) either page five or page eight of the newspaper. Some major themes can be

identified, including the juxtaposition of the “respectable” and “disreputable” poor; claims that the descriptions are not for sensational purposes and are an accurate record of what was observed; the kindness of the poor towards each other and towards the census enumerator (and, by implication, the journalist) and the emphasis that those responsible for the living conditions of the poor were landlords and the City Council (and, in some instances, the apathetic wealthy classes of Manchester). In fact, the article about Angel Meadow published on 6 April acknowledges the improvements in the district since the previous year.⁴⁵

All of these thematic elements add to the device of civic shame. Comparing the respectable with the “vicious” poor enabled a convincing argument for dealing with the slums to be made – if all slum dwellers were beyond redemption, there would be little argument for improving them. Assuring the reader of the veracity of the reports and distancing them from sensationalism was a mechanism for underlining their social worth. Jones has argued that the permanence of print was a guarantee of its veracity but this could not be taken for granted in a highly competitive age for newspapers.⁴⁶ Therefore, there was a perceived need to explicitly address the reader in this way. The constant repetition of the journalist as “your observer” in each article reinforced the sense that the journalist was acting on behalf of the public, revealing an awareness of the importance of creating a sense of *being there* as a validating mechanism. However, it must be noted that this judgement was subject to the journalists’ own personal experiences, beliefs and values and that they were undoubtedly influenced by both their own prejudices and those of others.

This can be observed in the accounts of the lives of some people in these neighborhoods. A Manchester journalist met a woman whom he deemed to have previously been respectable but whose business failure had resulted in her losing her home. He identified her former status from her speech pattern as “the sound of the letter ‘h’ retained its proper place” and remarked that her “civility and ease of manner (was) foreign to the slums.”⁴⁷ Walkowitz has

argued that the existence of such tropes as the previously respectable woman offers an opportunity to create and perpetuate the idea of the “fallen woman.”⁴⁸ This indicated the ease with which some journalists writing about slums slipped into reproducing long-established formulations of stereotypes of city dwellers and the power of binary oppositions within this kind of writing. Seen in this light, some slum writing emphasized the commonly-made argument that “the state of the poor affected all classes.”⁴⁹ Slum writing could be a matter of reproducing a “recurring cast of unambiguous slum types” as Mayne has suggested, instead of producing a more nuanced view of those who lived in the slums and using these as tools to pressure the local authority into action, which was the case with some slum journalism.⁵⁰

This series of articles frequently reiterated that the City Council was not doing enough to tackle the slums. While landlords were castigated for high rents and the poor standard of much of the accommodation, the first article went on to argue that “those who do not exercise the power the law has given them...are equally culpable.”⁵¹ This was both a reference to the local elected representatives, but also specifically the Council’s Health Committee, the system of sanitary inspectors and the Medical Officers of Health. The latter had been appointed in many British towns and cities from the 1840s to oversee improvements in public health.⁵² Whatever infrastructure was in place, City Councils often had other spending priorities – indeed the second article in this series directly criticized Manchester City Council for spending money on a new Town Hall, rather than on slum clearances.⁵³ Town Halls were usually a symbol of civic pride but, in this instance, they constituted a weapon for shaming the local authority.

Manchester was often negatively compared to other cities in terms of its slowness to deal with the problem of slums. Comparisons were made with London, Liverpool and Glasgow in the last article of the series.⁵⁴ The city was also compared to its sister city Salford, with the writer commenting that “sometimes rival corporations incite each other to good works, but in

this special instance, it is rather to be feared that the magnitude and supineness of the greater (Manchester) acts with repressive influence upon the lesser (Salford).”⁵⁵ These comparisons were often used as a form of “civic boosterism” in this period but they could also be deployed to achieve the opposite effect – civic shame.⁵⁶

Birmingham

In 1901, the *Birmingham Daily Gazette* published a series of 17 articles entitled “Scenes in Slumland” which were designed to provoke the City Council to address the acute conditions in the city’s slums. Politically unlike the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Gazette* was a conservative newspaper founded in 1741. However, it had become more progressive in its content during the nineteenth century with some success, leading Briggs to comment that “it was one of the most lucrative and important” of the provincial papers.⁵⁷

Like Manchester, Birmingham had been slow to confront the problems posed by its slum districts. Death rates in the city were comparatively low, which led to the assumption that the slums were not as acute a social problem there as elsewhere.⁵⁸ The City Council was dominated by shopkeepers who were often anxious to avoid committing to great public expenditure, preferring a low taxation regime instead.⁵⁹ This fact “could not but act as a check to any imaginative approach to the problems of urban life.”⁶⁰ The city introduced an Improvement Act in 1876 which laid the foundations for clearing much of the slums from the city center in 1878, to be replaced by commercial buildings. Those who were displaced from these areas were not rehoused until the 1890s.⁶¹

Written by James Cuming Walters, the paper’s assistant editor, the articles represented a visceral indictment of slum life in the early twentieth century. They were so successful and popular with readers that they were later re-published in pamphlet form, costing three pence and widely advertised in the newspaper. This tactic again reflects

Mackintosh's observation about the dual nature of the early twentieth-century newspaper – presenting the paper as a crusader for social justice and appealing to readers' appetites for sensational journalism and thereby providing extra commercial income.⁶² These articles, although more numerous than those in Manchester, followed a comparable pattern in the use of civic shame to advocate for social reform and slum clearances. They used similar tactics to compare the disreputable and respectable poor, stress the kindness of the slum dwellers to each other, contained reassuring statements to the reader of the veracity of the observations and placed the blame for the slums firmly on the City Council and on its health committee. Beginning on March 4, 1901 and ending on April 3, 1901, the use of the heading "Scenes in Slumland" as a branding device and the fact that the articles always appeared on the same page of the paper established this as a major contribution to slum writing in the city of Birmingham.

Like the Manchester articles, these were heavily descriptive, almost novelistic in their depictions of slum life. This challenges the evidence [presented by](#) Ellen Ross, whose work on London slum writing claims that journalists looked at people in slums but "did not stay to converse".⁶³ The reproduction of dialogue by slum journalists was a characteristic of this writing and worked to reinforce the sense of witnessing and *being there* that was becoming popular with readers. The articles continued the themes outlined above, emphasizing the positive traits of the respectable poor as "cheerful, persevering and aspiring and doing their utmost to maintain the credit of the place".⁶⁴ The reader was frequently reminded of the newspaper's purpose in printing such a detailed examination of slum life – the two most emphasized reasons were "to show what life is really like in the slums" and to "rouse the Corporation from its apathy."⁶⁵ Walters [was](#) not always welcome in the slums and documented that he was threatened by men and verbally abused by women, remarking that "it is not without a little personal risk that we pursued these investigations."⁶⁶ The use of the

plural pronoun *we* instead of *I* was not unusual in nineteenth-century journalism to draw the reader closer to the writing and to emphasize the journalist's responsibility to act on behalf of the readers. The final article in the series was signed with Walters' initials: J.C.W, alluding to the identity of the writer. Conboy suggests that this erosion of traditional nineteenth-century journalistic anonymity signaled a new direction – one that aligned with a more personal and popular style of writing but also one that brought readers and writers closer together.⁶⁷

The series was so successful that the paper launched a second series two weeks later on April 17, 1901. This time the paper focused more on resolutions to the slum problem, outlining the need “to fix responsibility... and to feel our way towards a solution to the problem.”⁶⁸ Civic shame was again used to its fullest extent in these articles – negative comparisons with the cities of Liverpool and Manchester is a feature of the first one. The writer stressed the lack of sanitary inspectors in Birmingham and their comparatively poor pay – 30–37 shillings a week, compared to 35–45 a week in Liverpool and Manchester.⁶⁹ But it is the second article of this second series that contained the ultimate in civic shame – entitled “A Special Case for the Health Committee,” Walters revealed that it was some members of the City Council and indeed of the health committee itself, who owned some of slumland's worst buildings.⁷⁰

The article explicitly outlined the secrecy that surrounded the ownership of many of the slum buildings and the lengths that had been taken to conceal this information. The revelation of a name was left until the very end of the article as befitted the traditional build-up of tension, more reminiscent of drama than journalism. The focus of the piece was a terrace of six houses on Waterworks Road in Edgbaston, Birmingham. Walters presented the owner of these buildings, as evidenced by “twenty witnesses” and the name on the rent book seen by him, as an Alderman of the City Council and a member of the health committee. The

final sentence read: “We leave the rest to his colleague and chairman, Alderman Cook”.⁷¹ It was likely that the person being referred to was Alderman Dr Barratt, a member of the health committee and a personal friend of Cook. The paper repeated the allegation in an article on May 3, now writing that five aldermen of the City Council owned properties in the slums.⁷²

The reaction to this piece was swift. Both Alderman Cook and Dr Alfred Hill, the Medical Officer of Health for Birmingham issued the paper with writs for libel in May. The paper referred directly to this situation in an editorial, published on May 13, ironically (or possibly not) sited next to an advertisement for Walters’ “Scenes in Slumland” pamphlet.⁷³ Dr Hill’s case was withdrawn after a payment of £250 for damages was made by the newspaper, while Alderman Cook’s case was found in his favor in August 1901 and the paper paid damages to him of £250. Cook had originally asked for £5,000 so the *Daily Gazette* had cause for some relief, but its experience was a lesson for all newspapers with interests in social problems, causing the *Midland Evening News* to remark that “a newspaper risks much when it plays the part of a crusader.”⁷⁴

The second series of “Scenes in Slumland” focused less on descriptions of slum life and more on remedies and issues of policy and was subsequently re-published in a separate pamphlet, with six additional articles on slum remedies. This re-publishing was, no doubt, a useful commercial device on the part of the newspaper but, taken with the first series pamphlet, it also represented a major contribution to the commentary on and analysis of the slum issue in the city. They formed a detailed policy document which offered journalism a role in the resolution of an intractable social problem. McNair has argued that such journalistic commentaries form “the interpretative moment” for the profession in helping the public to make sense of the world around them, with the added bonus of creating a brand loyalty for the newspaper.⁷⁵

The Birmingham paper's journalism was not merely about a newspaper taking up a particular theme in order to boost sales or shock its readers. It allowed the paper to take a very public stand on an issue and to pursue a detailed investigation of many aspects of it. It also facilitated the development of a unified style of reporting that presented different facets of the problem to the reader on a single page. This was especially observable in the reporting of the aftermath of the libel trial in August 1901. The paper reported on the trial in great detail. This was accompanied by (supportive) readers' letters on the subject, by editorial comment, by (supportive) opinions on the case from other newspapers and, in one case, a new "Scenes in Slumland" report.⁷⁶

This assemblage of varying types of commentary and reporting on the same page combined to produce a unified discourse around the subject of slums that presented a powerful single narrative on the issue to the readers. Academic accounts of fourth-estate journalism that focus on democratic accountability tend to center on national newspapers, but this study shows that the provincial press was equally capable of such campaigning at local level.⁷⁷ This followed a pattern already established in local periodicals from the nineteenth century and also found in the American journalism of Jacob Riis and George Foster.⁷⁸

It was possible for this journalism to combine the eye of the observer, local knowledge and developing professional journalistic values that prioritized interpretation, investigation and action over factual reporting alone. Even the casual reader could not fail to acquire the tools to understand the complexity of the slum problem presented in a single page and in a unified framework. The addition of the tool of civic shame to the ways in which urban life was documented and examined in the press added another dimension to the readers' understanding of the city in which they lived and of their role within it – a critical civic consciousness.⁷⁹

Slum Writing and Local Governance

The role played by journalism in contributing to public awareness and understanding of slums has not been studied in much detail. This is especially true of later nineteenth and early twentieth century slum writing. Slums were widely discussed in the press during the cholera crises that began in 1832.⁸⁰ What is often forgotten is the continuing existence of slums in many British cities throughout the rest of the nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries. While the press may broadly be seen as a vehicle for transmitting civic culture, the study demonstrates how it can challenge this culture. The press was able to produce empirical evidence that local authorities were not tackling the problem with sufficient resources and energy.

How did slum writing in Manchester and Birmingham compare to that of other cities?

Both the Manchester and Birmingham papers made unfavorable comparisons between their cities and the city of Liverpool. Liverpool had been a pioneer city for public health initiatives, despite its own slum problem, much of which emanated from its status as a port city and its attractiveness to Irish emigrants.⁸¹ Between the years 1858 and 1883, the city spent three million pounds demolishing slum properties, an aspect of the city's development that was widely reported on in other cities.⁸² Slum writing in the Liverpool press remained fairly consistent compared to Manchester and Birmingham and there were no in-depth investigations such as had taken place in those cities.

Leeds, another northern city greatly impacted by the Industrial Revolution, was also slow to clear its slums, embarking on a gradual clearance program from the early twentieth century.⁸³ This accounts for the late surge in interest in reporting on slums indicated in Table 1. Although the city had introduced public health legislation in 1842, the political will to enact this was late in coming, spurred on by a typhus outbreak in 1890.⁸⁴ A

stronger challenge from Conservatives to the long Liberal dominance of the City Council in the later nineteenth century also acted as a catalyst on the issue.

However, it is important to remember that slums were not always a party-political issue. City Councils dominated by both Tories and Liberals had failed to address the problem in many cities.⁸⁵ Similarly, the political inclinations of the press did not color their responses to slums or their desire to cover the issue. Both the liberal and conservative newspapers examined in this study demonstrate similar approaches to slum writing. The type of writing covered in this paper takes urban journalism considerably beyond the provision of facts and information. Indeed, arguably, it goes beyond interpretative commentary, extending into detailed discussions of solutions and remedies. Much American slum writing demonstrated that the slum was not inevitable.⁸⁶

While much of the earlier coverage tended to focus on more moralizing commentary as outlined by Healey, the discourse of the later part of the century has evolved to focus attention beyond blaming the poor for their own situations to blaming the local authorities.⁸⁷ The device of civic shame enabled this development, emboldening journalists to speak out more clearly than they had been prepared to do and try to identify particular individuals or committees who were at fault, rather than City Councils as a whole.

The dangers for newspapers in doing this is obvious – the use of libel actions to combat and discourage civic shame presented a financial risk for the press, such as that experienced by the *Birmingham Daily Gazette*. While the damages awarded were less than they might have been (and less than had been sought), the cases still presented an economic challenge for the newspapers and had the potential to act as a future deterrent in reporting these sensitive issues and the use the device of civic shame by journalists.

While it would be difficult to attribute a direct causal connection between the journalism examined here and the social programs of both Manchester and Birmingham

that followed their publication, Birmingham City Council in particular did move to establish a housing committee to replace the functions of the health committee and to address directly the problem of poor housing identified in “Scenes in Slumland”.⁸⁸ Alderman James Smith noted that this action was motivated by public opinion on the issue which “generally shaped the course of events”.⁸⁹ The civic shame that resulted from the publication of the detailed reports by the newspaper assisted in the directing of public attention to the issue over a sustained period of time and offered a striking narrative with which to challenge local political elites.

Conclusion

This study has examined the use of civic shame in a series of extended articles on slums in Manchester and Birmingham. Slums continued to be a major theme in British newspapers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The newspapers in this study used civic shame as a device for increasing pressure on local authorities to address the urban problems posed by slums. They did this by emphasizing the deserving nature of slum dwellers (interpreted by some scholars as moralizing but presented here as making the case for action), by developing vivid portraits of slum life based on their own observations, by developing negative comparisons with other cities and by placing the blame for the failure to tackle slums firmly at the heart of local government. The depth of the investigations and the branding of these articles cohered to create an apparently unified narrative on slums for the readers and presented journalism as part of the solution both to public ignorance of slums and to the wider problem of slums themselves. However, this approach also contained the paradox seen in slum journalism elsewhere – that such newspapers “reported news they believed saleable” – and, in the case of the *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, re-saleable in the form of pamphlets.⁹⁰

This study validates the idea of the press as agents of social power and as capable of contributing to public awareness of social conditions. It demonstrates that civic shame had replaced the earlier tactic of civic pride in provincial newspapers in advocating social reform. It also marks a subtle change in the status of the journalist – monetizing their articles in pamphlet form as practiced by the *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, not only enabled the newspaper to generate some additional income but also allowed their author to be firmly identified with their work, unlike the traditional anonymity still practiced by most journalists at the time. McNair has suggested that this represents the columnist as “commodity”, allowing the reporter to take responsibility for their own work and their name to be known to the public.⁹¹ It also, arguably, empowered the use of civic shame and prevented local government officials from accusing the press of the lack of conviction afforded by anonymity. Their status as personal observer of slum life took journalists beyond mere spectators, making them into potential actors, and offered them the opportunity to translate their observations and convictions into social action.

Notes

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³⁷ "In the Slums," *Manchester Guardian*, February 16, 1870, 6.

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