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Journalism

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THE word "journalism," meaning the business of writing, editing, and publishing on a daily schedule, was probably first introduced into Britain in the early 1830s, though the word "journalist" (from the French, which itself was derived from the Latin *diurnalis*, meaning belonging to the day) had been in use in France and Britain for decades. The moment the word "journalism" was introduced to British readers has usually been credited to a review article in the January 1833 issue of the *Westminster Review* and written by a working journalist named Gibbons Merle (though the review was published anonymously).[1] There was, however, an earlier use of "journalism" in a two-page piece in the "Monthly Commentary" section of the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1831.[2]

There is good reason, however, to give Merle and the *Westminster Review* the credit for introducing "journalism" to British readers because his review of a French article—"*Du Journalisme* in the *Revue Encyclopédique*"—began with a self-conscious recognition of the need for a general term for the business of newspapers. "JOURNALISM," he writes, "is a good name for the thing meant; at any rate it is compact, and when once in circulation is incapable of equivocal meanings. A word was sadly wanted. 'Newspapers,' and 'newspaper-writing,' not to mention that they have a bad odour, only imperfectly describe the thing intended. . . . The Press is . . . a new power; and it is neither arranged on a right footing as yet, nor is it properly appreciated, nor has time settled or sanctioned the names or conditions of the persons who take a part in its government."[3]

There had been recognition of the business of news production earlier, but another term was introduced to refer to it: "the Fourth Estate," again a phrase taken from the French, who divided the power of the state into three groups: church, nobility, and townsmen. Thomas Carlyle and a number of contemporary historians gave credit for the creation of the

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phrase "Fourth Estate" to Edmund Burke, who, addressing Parliament in 1787, said (according to Carlyle in 1841) that there were Three Estates in Parliament, but "in the Reporters' Gallery yonder, there sat a Fourth Estate more important than them all."[4] However, Carlyle himself had earlier in 1837 used the word "journalism" in *The French Revolution*, giving a whole chapter that title: "Great is Journalism. Is not every Able Editor a Ruler of the World, being a persuading of it; though self-elected, yet sanctioned, by the sale of his Numbers?"[5]

Both "journalism" and the phrase "the Fourth Estate" continue to be used even today, but, as Merle said in his *Westminster* review, "journalism" has the advantage of being short and unequivocal. It is also open to ever-widening inclusion as the times and the technology evolve.

The French had early recognized the need for a word to describe the business of the news, its publication and circulation, probably because of the powerful role that the news business had played in establishing the Revolution as dozens of printing presses put out hundreds of newspapers and posters and pamphlets every day. The name the French gave to this business in the 1700s was *journalisme*.

In Britain there had been newspapers produced as early as the early 1700s. (According to Asa Briggs and Peter Burke in *A Social History of the Media*, it has been estimated that fifteen million newspapers were sold in England in 1792.[6]) But apparently it was not until the early 1800s that the need to name the business of circulating the news arose. The introduction of the printing press, which could turn out hundreds of copies quickly, along with increasing literacy among the people, created both a need for the circulation of more news—as well as entertainment and general information—and the business of making it happen. The British borrowed the name of that business from the French *journalisme*.

Not everybody was happy about this new expansive business. Very early the British government showed its unhappiness by passing the Stamp Act of 1712 in which a tax was imposed on all manner of products in the journalism business, especially newspapers. It is beyond the scope of this piece to analyze the results of those "Taxes on Knowledge" in detail, but one can say that it shaped the nature of British journalism, not necessarily in a positive way, for 143 years until 1855 when the Stamp Act was partially removed.[7]

Merle, who has been given credit for introducing the word "journalism" to the British in his *Westminster Review* piece, used his review to make a severe critique of British journalism, as did the author of the earlier "Monthly Comment" in the *New Monthly Magazine*. The latter piece

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took up a question very much debated at that time, namely, "What does the newspaper press actually do?" One answer that was given frequently, especially by some of the editors and owners of newspapers, was that the press was simply reproducing and disseminating "public opinion." This position was somewhat defensive since there were many who thought the exposure of the "people" to all the "news" was dangerous. The anonymous author of the *New Monthly Magazine*'s "Monthly Comment," however, used the two pages he had to counter that claim. "To argue . . . that Journalism is nothing but an expression of public opinion, implying that it cannot guide it," he wrote, "is to argue that no superior talent can be employed in the service of that superior reason." And further, "We should much regret to see the time when an erroneous notion of the province and functions of Journalism should prevent these attempts at the correction of popular error, real or supposed."[8]

Merle's review was more comprehensive in its critique. He was reviewing a French article on *journalisme*, and he uses the French article as an invitation to compare the superiority of French *journalisme* to British journalism. He argues that to be a journalist in France is to be considered an educated and significant person, whereas in Britain, "It is not very usual to find anyone who will avow his connection with a newspaper, and if it were avowed, it would certainly operate to the disadvantage of the party so avowing." He goes into great detail about the good causes and positive results of the powerful role of *journalisme* in France versus the bad "odour" of journalism in England. In France the stature of the journalist resulted in significant and consequential reporting. But in England's newspapers, "very little will be found that has proceeded directly from the reflexions of a person of education and intelligence. . . . The Morning Paper of London aims at everything, and this may be the reason why it does nothing well."[9] Merle blames the quality of journalism in England on the Stamp Tax that levied a one-penny tax on every printed page, which encouraged owners of newspapers to print on very large sheets of paper (which was not the case in France). Merle argues that the need to fill up these very large pages resulted in much unimportant material: advertisements, gossip, extracts of foreign and country papers, reports of meetings and courts.

The introduction into Britain of the word "journalism" in the early 1830s marks a specific moment in time, seeming to grant full recognition that a new power was playing an important role in the doings of the government and the society at large. The two journalists who recognized and named this power also used it to critique that power. But now it had a

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name, which encouraged a journalist like Merle to critique exactly what he himself was doing, that is, journalism.

Notes

1. *Westminster Review* 18 (January 1833): 195–208.
2. *New Monthly Magazine* 31 (1831): 490–91.
3. *Westminster Review* 18 (January 1833): 195.
4. Thomas Carlyle, “Lecture 5” (1841), in *Heroes and Hero Worship* (New York: Fredrick A. Stokes, 1893), 182.
5. Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (1837; New York: Modern Library, 2002), 2:251.
6. Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, *A Social History of the Media,* 4th ed. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 77.
7. See Martin Hewitt, *The Dawn of the Cheap Press in Britain: The End of the Taxes on Knowledge, 1849–1869* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).
8. *New Monthly Magazine* 31 (1831): 490.
9. *Westminster Review* 18 (January 1833): 195, 199.

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