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What Is Popular? Studies on the Press in Interwar Europe: Popular Print as Historical Artefact

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The notion of ‘popular’ as a determinant in the study of the interwar periodical press lies at the centre of this special issue. The question posed in its title places the subject matter in a specific historical timeframe and context but also addresses a universal cultural publishing phenomenon, that of the popular press, as it is seen and analyzed by scholars from different countries in Europe and beyond. Popular periodicals were widely published across the globe in vernacular languages that were freighted with region-specific but often contested cultural meanings. Whilst retaining distinctive national features, however, they also incorporated many common elements that were freely transferred across national borders and between languages, particularly in relation to their aesthetic appearance, subject themes, and format and writing styles. The current growth of interest in the comparative study of this hitherto neglected category of the ‘popular’ thus further enriches a literature which has, to date, remained markedly Anglophone in its orientation. Finally, by juxtaposing the specific approaches adopted by the contributors to this special issue, the guest editors, Fabio Guidali and Gioula Koutsopanagou, seek to start a wider conversation about the value of historical perspectives and methodologies in strengthening the collaborative work of the *Journal of European Periodical Studies* and of the activities of the European Society for Periodical Research (ESPRit) more generally. In that sense, this issue is offered as an example of the ways in which international collaboration by historians may contribute to the growing field of periodical studies.

An extensive literature exists on the many definitions of the ‘popular’, a term with complex and sometimes contradictory meanings.¹ Notions of what constitutes the ‘popular’ varies spatially and over time. Chronologically-specific definitions immediately place them in a historical timeframe, in this case that of the interwar period, when popular magazines flourished. First appearing unevenly across continents during the half-century that followed 1890, they were products of their time, albeit ones that were constantly realigned in relation to the shifting relationships between their public audience and the cultural, commercial, and political elites that produced them. They were further transformed after the Second World War and reached their final years as a dominant print form during the 1970s, by which time other forms of mass visual

1 See Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 11–30; John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 6th edn (Harlow, England: Pearson, 2012), pp. 1–15, 219–42.

communication had become embedded, including colour television and the more specialized mass-circulation magazines. Popular magazines may thus be said to have been at their peak, in terms of circulation and visibility, in the interwar years and immediately afterwards. The two decades between the two world wars may thus be said to have been the period when the press became a truly 'mass' medium internationally, and in some respects the popular periodicals of that period may be regarded as the precursors of today's mass communication media, since they played a central role in the development of mass production, commercialization, and mass consumption. These features proved hugely adaptable over time and became a general model for twenty-first-century online journals and other forms of digital media.² The editorial decision, therefore, to focus this special issue on the interwar period is due both to it being fertile terrain from which to draw multiple examples, and also being a time when new forms of narrative and visualization emerged, alongside format and other forms of visual and textual experimentation, some of which were subsequently to transfer transnationally and cross-culturally to shape the many different forms assumed by the 'popular' press. The essays in this special issue seek to illuminate specific aspects of the broad diversity of the notion of 'what is popular' as it appeared in the interwar periodical press. By combining them in this way, we hope to expand the debate about the popular press beyond the confines of national and linguistic frontiers and to generate discussion about how the notion and the practice of the popular were modified in different time periods and historical and cultural contexts.

In an effort to combine historical awareness with contemporary cultural discourse in the context of periodical studies, questions arise as to what constitutes popular culture, how it provides a framework within which public voices may emerge, and the role it can play in popular cultural practice. Also raised by the 'cultural turn' in communication studies are the questions of what precisely it is that popular magazines do, what functions they perform, and the extent to which they represent features of a broader public sphere. Specifically, how do they interpret and incorporate elements of a public culture in their pages, and to what degree do they question social barriers and established cultural norms by voicing alternative viewpoints that claim to be closer to popular expectations? If so, what form did these alternatives take? Did they invite participation in actual political processes, or did they encourage more utopian expectations, escapist visions of an imagined better world? To understand how these elements were reflected in the pages of periodicals and expressed in both written and pictorial form, and the effects of this process at social, cultural, and financial levels, we propose that a historical approach, that is to say an approach based on historical methodology, is both necessary and productive for a broader interdisciplinary study of periodical print. It is precisely this historicity of the press and its content as a cultural reserve of its time that provides a canvas on which social and cultural events are imprinted clearly in time. It is also this that allows us to track down the mechanisms and the durable, time-tested traditions that have made the popular press able to convey its message and maintain its ability to appeal to so many readers and consumers. The dynamics of the popular element in the press is imprinted in its dissemination of cultural norms, the immediacy of its resonance with diverse audiences, and its ability to survive by maintaining a continuous dialogue with contemporary cultural trends.³

Media scholars argue that periodicals are products of the social reality of their time and as such became a model for the twenty-first-century digital media forms.

2 David Abrahamson and Marcia R. Prior-Miller, eds, *The Routledge Handbook of Magazine Research: The Future of the Magazine Form* (New York: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1–2.

3 Martin Conboy, *The Press and Popular Culture* (London: Sage, 2002), p. 1.

The main features of the magazine form are defined by its thematic specialization, its ability to project an identity that connects with the preferences of specific groups of readers, its combination of information and entertainment, its feature-driven editorial, its marketing value for advertisers, and, a dominant aspect of the form, its visual appeal.⁴ Until the mid-1990s, media research tended to be confined to a narrow temporal frame of reference, and communications technology was considered the driving force in media developments; minimal attention was paid to the broader historical context in which these developments occurred.⁵ Neglect of the broader social context in which the media and the technology that supported them developed, functioned, and performed led to a negation of the historical conditions under which media artefacts were produced, received, and understood.⁶ The development of media history as a major scholarly field suggested that the most effective way to write future histories of the media would be to start by charting the social history in which specific media were embedded.⁷ The fact is, however, that few scholars paid serious attention to the role of the media, much less to that of the print media, as historical artefacts.⁸ The scanty scholarly literature on the topic until relatively recently clearly reflects this outlook.

The essays selected for inclusion in this special issue are drawn mainly from papers delivered at the 8th [ESPRit Annual International Conference](#) on 'Periodicals and Visual Culture', held at the National Library of Greece/SNCF in Athens in September 2019, organized by the Greek Press History Workshop (ETMIET)/Research Centre for Modern History (KENI) at Panteion University, in collaboration with the Journalists' Union of the Periodical and Electronic Press (ESPIT). 'What is popular' was one of the two central themes of the conference, reflected in the first keynote speech given by Professor Martin Conboy at the opening of the conference, centering on definitions of the popular in the formative era 1935–45 and the impact that such a style of popular newspaper would have on the entire British market. 'What is popular' also constituted one of the four thematic panels of the Postgraduate Workshop, an adjunct to the main conference. As an academic forum devoted to an interdisciplinary, multilingual approach to the study of the press, with a broadly conceived, peer-reviewed online journal, ESPRit offers a uniquely positioned platform for the exchange of ideas and the promotion of academic dialogue on subjects of this nature.

In assembling this special issue, we made an effort to highlight some key themes that emerged during the conference. These include the historical development of the 'popular' element in the periodical and newspaper press during the interwar years (Martin Conboy), the crossing of spatial and language frontiers (Martin Conboy, Nicole Immig, Victoria Kuttainen, Enrico Landoni, Irene Piazzoni, James Whitworth), and

4 Abrahamson and Prior-Miller, pp. 1–2.

5 See James Curran, 'Media and the Making of British Society c. 1700–2000', *Media History*, 8.2 (2002), 135–54; Sian Nicholas, 'Media History or Media Histories? Re-Addressing the History of the Mass Media in Interwar Britain', *Media History*, 18.3–4 (2012), 379–94; Kevin Williams, 'Doing Media History: The Mass Media, Historical Analysis and the 1930s', in *The Routledge Companion to British Media History*, ed. by Martin Conboy and John Steel (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 29–40.

6 Tom O'Malley, 'History, Historians and the Writing of Print and Newspaper History in the UK c. 1945–1962', *Media History*, 18.3–4 (2012), 289–310 (p. 289).

7 James Curran, 'Communication and History', in *Explorations in Communication and History*, ed. by Barbie Zelizer (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 46–59 (p. 47). See James Curran, 'Rethinking the Media as a Public Sphere', in *Communication and Citizenship*, ed. by Peter Dahlgren and Colin Sparks (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991), pp. 27–57 (p. 27); Tom O'Malley, 'Media History and Media Studies: Aspects of the Development of the Study of Media History in the UK, 1945–2000', *Media History*, 8.2 (2002), 155–73; Mark Hampton, 'Media Studies and the Mainstreaming of Media History', *Media History*, 11.3 (2005), 239–46; Michael Pickering, 'The Devaluation of History in Media Studies', in *The Routledge Companion to British Media History*, pp. 9–18 (pp. 11, 16).

8 See Adrian Bingham, 'Media products as historical artefacts', in *The Routledge Companion to British Media History*, pp. 19–28.

an exploration of the contributions made by pioneer magazine editors (Irene Piazzoni). Other approaches investigate the parameters of magazine research with a focus on the subject matter, textual content, and visual presentation (James Whitworth, Enrico Landoni), the tracing of the notion of the ‘popular’ across a range of different print and non-print media (Victoria Kuttainen), and the current, highly uneven and disparate state of research in periodical studies (Nicole Immig).

Martin Conboy, a specialist in the history of the popular press and a pioneering scholar in the establishment of media history as an academic field, explores the complexity of the term ‘popular’ when used in relation to mass media during the formative era of the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s in Britain. He evaluates the impact of the popular style, exemplified mainly by the *Daily Mirror*, as being the prototype of a wider ‘tabloid culture’ which, as Conboy argues, ‘continues to inform our contemporary legacy and digital news environment’.

Irene Piazzoni provides a fascinating account of the innovative ideas, experimental marketing strategies, and adoption of specific editorial formulas, which the Milanese publishers Rizzoli, Mondadori, and Vitagliano pioneered, thereby renewing the Italian popular magazine market during the interwar period, and maintaining a readership by avoiding the attentions of fascist censors and leaving a lasting impact on Italian magazine publishing until at least the 1970s. Directly addressing the theme of the special issue, Piazzoni explains how the Milanese editors interpreted the concept of ‘popular’ in ways that differed from early-twentieth-century definitions by challenging their ‘intellectually inferior’ status. They thought of ‘popular’ as a progressive notion of ‘public’, building their own readership by modelling a new type of periodical ‘for everyone’. “‘Popular’ no longer had the qualitative meaning of “for the people” but rather a quantitative one, “as widespread as possible”, she explains, and concludes that their periodicals ‘acted as a decompression chamber for elaborating a way between tradition and modernity, between different national cultures, high-brow and low-brow culture’. She defines her argument in historical terms, examining the broader social context in which the media and the technology that supported them developed, functioned, and performed in the interwar period. She urges historians ‘not to limit themselves to considering popular weeklies as a single entity but [...] [as] a reciprocal game of mirrors and accompaniments’.

In a similar way, Enrico Landoni’s article demonstrates how the study of popular periodicals, when embedded in their historical context, allows a long and critical view of the larger process of the political and social change of which they were part. Landoni shows that sports periodicals can more properly be understood as an evolutionary development rooted in the social and cultural environment; they functioned in response to it. Propagandistic sport journalism served a particular role in an important phase of building the fascist dictatorship when it was seeking to popularize and promote its image. The publication of *Lo Sport Fascista* in 1928 served a dual purpose: to propagate the fascist regime’s sport politics as its official sports organ, and to inform and promote the popularity of sports other than football and cycling, such as fencing, boxing, swimming, rowing, and gymnastics, at a time when Italian sport was becoming an almost religious ritual.

Victoria Kuttainen bases her arguments on research that culminated in the publication of *The Transported Imagination: Australian Interwar Magazines and the Geographical Imaginaries of Colonial Modernity* (2018), co-edited with Susann Liebich, and Sarah Galletly. Focusing on two interwar middlebrow culture and leisure periodicals, *Home* and *BP*, ‘from localized sites like Australia’ she suggests that leafing through their pages, and analyzing their ‘particularized responses’ to the era’s economic, social, cultural, and technological challenges can offer another way of reading the extraordinary cultural and media change that the early-twentieth-century advances in communications

technology brought to the global print culture. The author chose to negotiate the theme of the special issue — ‘what is popular’ — across a broad spectrum of media, traditional and emerging, without limiting it solely to print culture. Cultural artefacts, such as books, films, and phonograph records, are rarely included in the field of periodical studies, and the benefits of such a comparative critical approach are obvious, as Kuttainen’s article demonstrates.

Whitworth explores the special weight of visual satire in British interwar newspapers. His central argument concerns the innovation of the pocket cartoon in the late 1930s, first introduced in Britain by the *Daily Express*, and Osbert Lancaster’s great contribution to it. Lancaster’s new cartoon form and style, combining politics and topical stories involving ordinary people, served as a kind of ‘personification of the popularization of the press’ as the author argues. Whitworth’s engaging and insightful essay highlights Lancaster’s contribution to developing the pocket cartoon in that period as a ‘culmination of the changing form and content of visual satire over the previous decade’. References are made to two distinguished practitioners, Sidney Strube and David Low, in relation to how the cartooning context developed and evolved during the interwar period to culminate in the pocket cartoon. The editorial cartoon, the strip cartoon, the joke cartoon, the topical cartoon, and the innovative pocket cartoon all found resonance and response, and contributed to creating a massive, engaged audience by combining information with entertainment. Many of Lancaster’s experiments in style, form, and definitions have passed into the critical canon. Whitworth analyses the evolution, distinctiveness, and importance of the pocket cartoon during this period, and gives an account of Lancaster’s major influence on the culture of cartooning and his impact that went far beyond the 1930s.

In Greece, a great boom in the production of popular magazines occurred during the interwar years, to which, after 1922, the influx of a million refugees from the disastrous Asia Minor campaign contributed greatly. Populations gathered in the main cities, especially Athens, providing a larger reading public. Urbanization had helped create a new vision of the press, as had growing industrialization, including a continuous drive to upgrade existing transportation systems. Yet despite their special significance, Nicole Immig correctly observes that there has been no scholarly interest in Greek popular magazines, nor studies of the overall situation based on systematic research. The only attempts to approach it were in the early 1980s and consisted of no more than fragmentary efforts. Realizing this neglect, the Press History Workshop (ETMIET) has undertaken a research project on Greek interwar popular periodicals. The main aim of this project is to establish the first comprehensive archive of periodicals in this country, in collaboration with other relevant institutions, which will facilitate the collection of scattered material and make it accessible to researchers and the public.

These six essays serve to remind us of the complexities of the very notion of the ‘popular’, and indicate the range of possible approaches that might be adopted in researching its history. They may also, considered in combination, invite further approaches that might broaden and deepen new avenues of future investigation, a subject further developed by Fabio Guidali in the Afterword that examines ways of interrogating the ‘popular’ more as a frame of reference than an *idée fixe*. In the variety of their subject matter, the non-uniformity of their disciplinary perspectives, and the geographical expansion of the field of enquiry, these essays all point to beneficial new ways of understanding the ‘popular’ in relation to periodical print in particular, and popular culture more generally. Together, they demonstrate the many and diverse ways in which research in this field may, and we trust will, develop in the future.

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