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Holyoake's Ghost: Remembering Press Activism's Role in the Invention, Cultural Empowerment, and Social Mobilisation of Britain's Co-operative Movement, 1821-1871

Mitch Diamantopoulos

This study spotlights alternative journalism's contributions to the British co-operative movement's take-off in the nineteenth century. It shows five waves of press activism that powered movement expansion: the Owenist agitations, the Brighton wave, the socialist turn (including the radical unstamped), the Rochdale moment, and the establishment of a movement-owned press. This historical sociology of co-operators' press activism demonstrates that alternative media innovation was central to advancing literacy, intellectual and press freedoms, and the early British movement's advance. Indeed, co-operative news-work — from street-hawking to the activist journalism of movement intellectuals such as Robert Owen, Dr. William King, Henry Hetherington, and George Jacob Holyoake — drove the democratic broadening-out and working class cultural empowerment upon which movement gains depended. From 1821's *The Economist* to the 1871 launch of *The Co-operative News* (later *Co-op News*), the analysis thus shows that alternative media fostered co-operation's emergent culture. The analysis concludes by assessing co-operative press history's implications for contemporary co-operative theory and movement strategy. It reveals the continuing importance of media innovation — to develop alternative media, the emerging sector of news co-operatives, and an alternative public sphere in which the co-operative movement's counter-hegemonic values flourish.

Introduction: Accounting for the 'Subjective Factor' in British Co-operation's Ascent

If men (sic) in a movement knew the value of a good paper representing it, guiding it, defending it, they would certainly provide to have one. A co-operative society without intelligence, or an industrial movement without an organ, is like a steam boat without a propeller. It is all vapour and clatter without progress (Holyoake, 1875, p. 375).

What propelled nineteenth century British co-operation's progress? The objective failure of an industrialising capitalism to meet many popular needs certainly created a "crisis of authority" for the established economic order (Polanyi, 1944/2001). However, this was a necessary but insufficient condition for movement advance. This article shows that informal, popular education — including the journalistic airing of iconoclastic views and civil disobedience against press controls — steadily eroded traditional fealty to clerical, state and bourgeois authorities (Hollis, 1970; Royle, 1974; Thompson, 1966). Moreover, the alternative press sparked and kindled co-operative ideas and experiments. In prefiguring co-operative alternatives to the capitalist firm and ethos, this insurgent press created mental preparedness for change — much as Gramsci suggested Enlightenment *philosophes* had paved the French Revolution's symbolic path. He famously argued "the bayonets of Napoleon's armies found their road already smoothed by an invisible army of books and pamphlets that had swarmed out of Paris from the first half of the eighteenth century and had prepared both men (sic) and institutions for the necessary renewal" (1917/1977, p. 12). Similarly, an army of periodicals accompanied the British movement's earliest incarnation under the aegis of Owenism. This intellectual-cultural ferment had equally profound implications for mutualism's subsequent rise. Indeed, nineteenth century champions of British co-operation such as Robert Owen, Dr. William King, Henry Hetherington, and George Jacob Holyoake were media activists as well as co-operators; their publications were

key to their effectiveness in articulating co-operation as an *idée force*. Much as Enlightenment intellectuals created the revolutionary press and cultural conditions for the French Revolution, radical newspapers, books and pamphlets swarmed across Britain through the nineteenth century. This cultural mobilisation was an important part of the emergence of working class consciousness and their maturing co-operative movement (Holyoake, 1879; Thompson, 1966). From driving Owenism's rapid expansion to its subsequent metamorphosis into a consumer co-operative movement, British press activism prepared both people and institutions for the necessary renewal.

Educational innovation and press activism defined co-operation's emerging counter-hegemony in nineteenth century Britain: "writing and reading seem to have been an essential part of its practice," argues Yeo (2017a, p. 11). One testament to popular learning's importance was the Rochdale Pioneers' educational fund; 2.5 % of their annual surplus stocked reading rooms with newspapers and journals, expanded their library, and supported wide-ranging lectures. The Pioneers proposed devoting ten per cent to education but were disallowed by the Registrar (Woodin, 2012, p. 80). Nevertheless, by 1875, the Pioneers boasted 11,000 books, eleven reading rooms, and a full-time librarian (Woodin, 2012). Co-operative shops were thus centres of 'news' and 'intelligence' as well as distribution depots for household supplies (Yeo, 2017a, p. 44). Like pubs and coffee houses, which drew patrons by subscribing to publications, these stores circulated 'associational intelligence' and 'associational communications' as well as the products on their shelves (p. 90). This trade in news made shops important nodes in the counter-hegemonic apparatus which produced and circulated co-operative values, ideas, and attitudes. MacPherson (2007) similarly claims co-operation's extraordinary growth through the twentieth century reflected "extensive educational activities by publishing newspapers, pamphlets, journals and books" (p. 223). Both Yeo and MacPherson thus echo Gramsci's oft-quoted dictum: "every revolution has been preceded by an intense labour of criticism, by the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas" (1917/1977, p. 12). They suggest the revolution in economic life that gave rise to British co-operation was preceded by a symbolic revolution — in which reporters, editors, printers, booksellers, publicans, and street hawkers all played important roles.

By examining press activism's prefigurative role in powering co-operation's take-off, this article reinforces recent emphases on adult education's importance in British movement life (Shaw, 2012; Woodin, 2012), including alternative journalism's contributions to co-operation's 'emergent culture' (Durr, 2017; Gurney, 2017; Legette, 2017; Thornes, 2017; Yeo, 2017b). Moreover, by historicising and problematising a monopolistic, investor-owned media sector, this work also resists media history's devaluation as the "neglected grandparent of media studies" (Curran, 1993, p. 27) and counters alternative media's marginalisation across the social sciences (Fuchs, 2010). Finally, a Gramscian approach resists a reductive economic determinism that discounts the cultural; instead, this analysis follows Raymond Williams' precept that "what we call society is not simply a network of political and economic arrangements, but also a process of learning and communication" (1962, p. 11). Clearly, without successfully waging popular struggles to learn and communicate about co-operation there could be no co-operative movement. Against reductive and ahistorical approaches, hegemony analysis thus offers a more interdisciplinary, complete, and proportional understanding of the movement's historical sociology and animating spirit—with theoretical and strategic significance for contemporary practice.

Co-op News' 150th anniversary in 2021 reminds us of news-workers' historic contributions to movement-building. Of course, abstracting their efforts from the wider field of social forces would yield an overly simplistic media-determinism. Yet the evidence below shows the fights for a free press and co-operative alternatives were closely related through this half-century of the British movement's birth. The war of words staged in the radical, working class, and co-operative press inspired a widening constituency for co-operation. These editorial agitations shaped an increasingly coherent social project and cohesive historical bloc. Conversely, without careful attention to alternative media institution-building and continuous journalistic intervention, many 'great men' of co-operative history would lack their present-day notoriety and historical

relevance. Without these decisive interventions in public opinion formation, mutualism's development would have been significantly hampered, circumscribed and delayed. As the account below illustrates, five waves of press agitation drove the evolving movement.

The First Wave: Robert Owen, the Owenist Press, and the Modern Dawn of the Co-operative Ideal, 1821-1845

Although experiments in co-operation long predate Robert Owen (1771-1858), his writings, press activism, and achievements in social reform spawned an expanding social movement that took his name and legitimated the early co-operative cause. He led campaigns to reduce the work week and establish trade unionism (Harrison, 2009; Podmore, 2019; Pollard & Salt, 1971). Owen also pioneered practical reforms to improve conditions at his cotton mill and model industrial community, New Lanark; its achievements inspired social change across Europe and established his early authority as Britain's leading voice for reform (Engels, 1880). For example, 20,000 signed the New Lanark guest book from 1815 to 1820 (Royle, 1974).

Owen's most revolutionary idea was that people were shaped by circumstances; improving workers' quality of life would thus extend the Enlightenment promise of self-realisation beyond bourgeois ranks (Owen, 1813). The humanist moral imperative to support 'self-improvement' through education was at Owenism's heart. As Polanyi (1944/2001) argues, Owen's existential focus on popular human potential "enabled the roots of the movement to penetrate into that deeper layer where personality itself is formed" (p. 176). Some Owenites therefore followed their champion with messianic fervour. Like Fourier and St. Simon, Owen's utopian focus was fixed on creating decent working, learning, and living conditions in 'villages of co-operation'.

Owen was an enthusiastic propagandist for this co-operative conception of society; his reformist zeal was tidily summed up in a movement periodical's title, *New Moral World*. Against the immoral inequities of the Old World, he articulated his atheistic new religion in newspaper articles, essays, reports, and books. Harrison (2009) estimates he published about 130 titles. In 1813, Owen's *New View of Society* imagined a humane alternative to industrial capitalism. Replacing Christianity's other-worldly focus, his 'Rational Religion' inducted cadres of 'social missionaries' to build the reform movement. Apart from his short-lived *Mirror of Truth* of 1817, the first newspaper to use the term "Owenite" was the *Economist*, debuting in 1821 (Royle, 1974). Published by London's Co-operative and Economical Society, mostly comprised of printers, it was edited by George Mudie. It would be but one battalion in the army of periodicals soon dedicated to scaling-up this campaign. Popular enthusiasm for Owenism's promise of a better life was matched only by detractors' reactions, such as the fury unleashed against his atheism when he arrived in Bristol to open a local Hall of Science. His books were burned, rioters damaged the Hall, and Owen was forced to make a hasty retreat to London.

Much as the Voltairean mood transformed eighteenth century French culture, early nineteenth century Owenist literature would dominate Britons' utopian imaginations. It popularised co-operative villages but also laid the intellectual and moral foundations for the trade union, co-operative, and socialist movements. Central Owenist newspapers from 1820 to 1860 included *Co-operative Magazine*, *New Harmony Gazette*, *Crisis*, *New Moral World* and *Reasoner* (Harrison, 2009). In fact, over a hundred periodicals either dedicated substantial space to Owenism or were devoted to Owenism. Each week branch reports and missionaries' lectures were published, connecting local believers to the wider cause. These journals thus advanced working class Owenism, bringing intellectual coherence, cultural dynamism, and social cohesion to the expanding movement.

At its height, Owenism's 'Rational Religion' enlisted a hundred thousand workers with substantial influence over a million (McCabe, 1922). Propaganda's potential as a hinge of history was thus not lost on Owen. The British Association for Promoting Co-operative Knowledge (BAPCK) was founded in 1829, an information clearing house for Britain's 300 co-operative societies. It staged lectures, circulated pamphlets, and coordinated the missionary

network (Harrison, 2009). Radical co-operator William Carpenter's *The Weekly Free Press* would be its voice, a role later assumed by his *Political Letters* and other unstamped papers in the early thirties (Hollis, 1970).

Owen used his money, religious networks, and volunteers to get the good word out. He bought up to 30,000 copies of a newspaper containing one of his addresses (Pankhurst, 1991). These he would post to clergy. In two months, he spent as much as £4,000 on promoting his ideas. By the end of the 1830s, 1,000 pamphlets were circulated in Manchester every Sunday. Every year another 40,000 were handed out in London. In total, two and a half million tracts were circulated from 1839-1841 (Royle, 1974). The circulation of *New Moral World* meanwhile doubled from October 1838 to June 1840.

Over roughly three decades, the Owenist press thus increased its reach, frequency, variety, and popular appeal; this created important ideological and cultural conditions for the maturing movement's subsequent developments. As Friedrich Engels wrote, "every real advance in England on behalf of workers links itself to the name of Robert Owen" (1880, p. 11). Certainly, it is hard to explain Owenism's emergent counter-hegemony without accounting for the relentless agitations of the many newspapers sworn to its cause. In fact, while conducting research for *The Condition of the Working Class in England* from 1844 to 1845 in Manchester, Engels both contributed to Marx's *Rheinische Zeitung* and Owens' *New Moral World*. In Engels' view, the co-operatives inspired by Owenism gave "practical proof that the merchant and the manufacturer are socially quite unnecessary" (1880, p. 50).

The nineteenth century periodicals of Owenism thus strengthened Britain's gathering movement much as the Enlightenment climate of eighteenth century France had tilled its cultural terrain for political revolution. Owenism's radical humanism had defined the organic new popular ideology of this emergent historical bloc, with co-operation assuming a prominent role. Contributors to the Owenist press would extend co-operators' reach, articulating a sense of movement belonging — and alternative possibilities — across a broadening geographic expanse. Without the war of words waged by its early press, Owenism would have lacked crucial artillery for its cultural expansion. Similarly, co-operation's progress would have been denied an important beachhead.

The Second Wave: Dr. William King, the Brighton Press Boom and Working Class Leadership, 1828-1830

While the early Owenist agitations focused on forming villages of co-operation, Dr. William King's penny monthly *The Co-operator* helped drive the 'Brighton wave' of worker co-operative shops in the late 1820s. This represented an important discursive shift toward the working class in cultural politics as well as effective control. Against the utopian socialists' tendency toward high-minded abstractions, King pooled practical advice from those experiments' failures and successes. This cleared a cultural hurdle for the emerging movement: "very few manual workers were at first able to understand how (the London Co-operative Society's) fine philosophical principles could be reduced to daily practice" (Mercer, 1922/2012, p. xxii).

Published from 1 May 1828 to 1 August 1830, King disdained what Mercer called "metaphysical fogs and foolish speculations" (p. xxii). Instead, he addressed workers in language easily understood. For example, in the inaugural issue King implores: "We must go to a shop every day to buy food and necessaries — why then should we not go to our own shop?" (King, 1828/2012, p. 3). *The Co-operative Magazine's* editor applauded this self-consciously democratic register, declaring that King's "publication has become a sort of textbook to co-operators" (p. xxv). Expanding the audience for co-operative ideas marked an important turn toward popular leadership of the evolving movement.

King's contempt for the learned gentlemen's vernacular thus recognised that economic democratisation must proceed hand in hand with cultural democratisation. Indeed, combatting ignorance was a banner theme in *The Co-operator*: "The first step ... toward Cooperation, and

the first and last step to make it successful, is to remove this ignorance by every means in our power. We must take this thick veil from our eyes ...” (King, 1828/2012 p. 4). However, King battled for hearts as well as minds. He fostered an associative and self-reliant ethos as the movement’s guiding light. Surely, co-operation required workers to *think* differently and learn more? However, it also required they *feel* differently about the economy and their place in it. This affective politics placed a positive charge on working class fraternity: “Co-operation means, literally, ‘working together’ ... But before the many can work, they must join hand in hand; they must know their object, and feel a common interest and a common tie” (King, 1828/2012, p. 2). Of course, within this call for class solidarity was an implicitly anti-capitalist antagonism: “At present we work one against another — when one of us gets work, another loses it; and we seem natural enemies to each other. The plain reason of this is, because we work for others, not for ourselves.” The resolution was clear: “Let us therefore begin to work for OURSELVES and not entirely for others” (p. 2, emphasis in original).

Such agitations were not appreciated by Brighton’s Establishment. For example, a local reverend alleged King’s “motives were ‘wicked’, that his principles were ‘horrid’, and that he himself was ‘an infidel!’” (Mercer, 1922/2012 p. xxvi). As a physician, these attacks threatened King’s ability to support his family. Like formal press controls (such as taxes and seditious libel statutes), such informal sanctions also threatened press freedom and movement advance. By August 1830, King decided to issue no more editions of *The Co-operator*. He nevertheless claimed it had sown the seeds for 300 societies. While Durr (2017) notes the doubtless hyperbole at work: “King has been given a leading role partly because he claimed one and had a journal in which he could write himself into the story ...” (p. 23), among his readers were workers who would later found the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers. He may have conceded his battle, but mutualism’s position had been advanced.

Unlike the dependence on bourgeois patrons fostered by Owen’s large-scale plans for villages of co-operation, King’s brief agitation strengthened the cause of working class self-help within the movement. The locus of activity shifted from co-operative communities to co-operatives in the community. Although Brighton’s co-operative shops ended in failure (as would Owen’s communes), King’s campaign helped seed “an extraordinary flowering of working class, radical and co-operative journalism” (Durr, 2017, p. 11). The *Associate* and *The British Co-operator* launched in 1829. *The Cooperative Miscellany*, *The Chester Co-operator*, *The United Trades Cooperative Journal* and *The Herald to the Trades Advocate* commenced publication in 1830. This was followed by what Hollis describes as “a small army of co-operative chronicles, magazines and miscellanies in the midlands and north” (1970, p. 101). Workers would not only act for themselves by setting up co-operative shops; they would increasingly think, publish and debate amongst themselves in the pages of their own alternative press. Just as shops brought co-operation within workers’ financial reach, this booming movement press helped labourers overcome their sense of cultural inferiority and cognitive dependence on their ‘social betters’. Rather than await rescue by the grand philanthropic projects of well-meaning, wealthy gentlemen, this new wave of press activism further broadened, educated and emboldened the movement base for direct action.

The Third Wave: William Thompson, the Critique of Exploitation, and the Rise of the Pauper Press, 1830-1836

Brighton co-operators were not alone in championing working class leadership. Over fifty socialist newspapers circulated between 1820 and 1840 in England, reaching an estimated half million socialists out of a population of about 16 million (Pankhurst, 1991). Paradoxically, the press that gave early voice to Owenism now sowed seeds for its transcendence. The friendship between Anna Wheeler and Irish radical William Thompson exemplifies co-operative socialism’s emergence from Owen’s shadow. A frequent contributor to co-operative periodicals, Wheeler shared many of Thompson’s socialist-feminist views and helped form them. An influence on Marx, the co-operator from Cork first coined the term ‘socialism’ to distinguish his

working class vision from the early movement's dependence on Owen, wealthy benefactors, and the bourgeois state. During Owen's American interregnum from 1824 to 1829, when he unsuccessfully sought to establish a model community at New Harmony in Indiana, working class leaders increasingly came under Thompson's influence. By 1830 his writings "placed him, rather than Owen, in the forefront of the Movement" (Pankhurst, 1991, p. 110). Thompson appears to have helped found the *Co-operative Magazine*, contributing the inaugural editorial. As the battle for intellectual leadership advanced, a section of the movement press also broke away from orthodox Owenism.

Militant workers grown weary of Owen's calls for harmony between the classes strove instead for working class unity between trade unionists and co-operators. This movement overlap was evident even in trade union journals' titles such as *The United Trades' Co-operative Journal* and *The Union Pilot and Cooperative Intelligencer*. This struggle for control continued into the 1840s. In fact, Owen faced down editorial mutinies by James Morrison of the trade unions' *Pioneer* and James 'Shepard' Smith of the *Crisis*. Failing to regain control of the *Pioneer*, he launched *The Official Gazette of the Executive Council*. As for the *Crisis*, he folded it in favour of his new title *New Moral World* (Thornes, 2017). Indicative of Owen's view, he declared in an 1837 issue that "Whenever the working classes has attempted any complicated, important measure that required unity, patience, and perseverance ..., they have failed in every instance ..." (cited in Mercer, 1922/2012, p. 135).

However, the tide was turning toward the democratic, socialist wing. On the one hand, this reflected popular discomfort with the movement's dependence on bourgeois benevolence and control — including its own patriarch's authoritarian style. On the other hand, it reflected the working class's growing sense of its own power to take collective action. Largely played out in the pages of the alternative press, this evolution both built on Thompson's radicalism and the Brighton agitation's working class turn of the late 1820s.

The spark that ignited co-operators' role in the next wave of press activism was the suppression of *The United Trades Cooperative Journal* in 1830 (Hollis, 1970). Other co-operative publications tended to be local in focus, provincial in outlook, and limited in scope; they were therefore allowed to publish unstamped. By contrast, this publication carried a wider spectrum of news and opinion; it was suppressed as a threat to public order. Outraged, co-operator William Carpenter launched the unstamped *Political Letters* to test the law. A prominent Thompson ally at Co-operative Congresses, Carpenter had edited the *Trades Newspaper* and *Weekly Free Press* — the main voice of BAPCK — for the previous two years. Most recently he had edited the *Magazine of Useful Knowledge and Cooperative Miscellany*. His challenge earned him an eight-month jail sentence; it also opened a new chapter in British press history, with other co-operators joining the fray.

First to follow was fellow co-operator Henry Hetherington. He launched the unstamped *Penny Papers*; it would later become the *Poor Man's Guardian*, the most important of the radical unstamped. Hetherington had joined London's first printing co-operative in 1821 and was then also part of Mudie's discussion circle. He joined the first London Co-operative Trading Association, which would become the BAPCK. Altogether, Hetherington published six titles. His agitations landed him in jail three times; he served a total of a year and a half. Similarly, Alexander Campbell, co-operative leader in Glasgow and Orbiston community manager, would be imprisoned in 1833 for his role in the unstamped. He would later publish *Spirit of the Age* (Royle, 1974).

Co-operator William Benbow was a radical bookseller and publisher who edited three publications, ran a coffee house, and later ran a meeting place for co-operators (Hollis, 1970) including the Female Society which, allied to the National Union of Working Classes, campaigned for the unstamped press (Rogers, 2017). He was imprisoned for 16 months for seditious language. Fellow co-operator Richard Lee printed Benbow's *Tribune* and was sentenced to six months for editing and printing the unstamped *Man*. James Watson was twice jailed for selling the unstamped, serving over a year in jail altogether. A bookseller, printer, and co-operative store manager, he would work with George Jacob Holyoake in the 1840s

and 1850s. Selling him his publishing business in 1853, Watson thus tutored Holyoake in the tradition of the dissident press.

These were only among the most prominent co-operators engaged in the unstamped's fight for press freedom. As Hollis (1970) recounts, nearly 750 men, women and children in London alone served jail time for selling the radical unstamped between 1831 and 1836. By joining this popular cause, co-operators defended their right to maintain their channels of communication. In the early 1800s when around one per cent of Britons read daily or Sunday newspapers (Williams, 2013), they also reached out to potential new recruits priced out of the legal news market. Figures like Carpenter and Hetherington staged high profile demonstrations of civic courage, raising co-operation's prestige amongst working class militants. Their determined resistance earned respect and trust; it also inspired others to take their ideas seriously, or even follow their audacious example. The champions of the unstamped also demonstrated workers' ability to create networks of solidarity — from staffing interned comrades' operations, to the Society for the Protection of Booksellers, to the Victims' Fund for detained street-hawkers. Indeed, for six years the defiance of the unstamped sent an important message to the working class: you can fight oppressors through your own agency, collective economic action, and mutual aid.

On many levels, this press activism encouraged working class co-operation. In fact, this evolving network of popular dissent was a movement unto itself. The alternative press relied on the labour of thousands: to write, edit, print, publish, distribute, and provide reading venues for its torrent of pamphlets, newspapers, and books. Through their protracted struggle, the pauper press thus provided an important apparatus for collective movement learning. Its vast reach also created important means for the movement's 'organic intellectuals' to earn, or supplement, their livings through movement-building. From street-hawking and journalism to lecturing and publishing, the work of popular education thus provided important incubators for the emerging leadership of co-operation's extended social movement family. Co-operation's most visible 'economic' achievements would depend on this alternative press network's ephemeral but important contributions.

Most notably, this working class insurgency from within Owenism — stoked by Thompson's campaign, the Brighton press boom and then the radical unstamped — set the stage for consumer co-operation's historic breakthrough at Rochdale in 1844. Symptomatically, half the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers' founders were Owenite-socialists (Fairbairn, 1994). Fairbairn argues they may have adopted their name from the trade union's flagship newspaper, the *Pioneer*: a statement they were "consciously taking their place in the movement for social reform and the advancement of the working class and its interests" (1994, p. 4). Certainly the Chartist press, notably the *Northern Star*, carried regular reports on co-operative initiatives (Thornes, 2017).

The Pioneers' 1844 rise to notoriety and the following year's collapse of Owen's Queenwood community and the closure of his *New Moral World* decisively shifted the balance of forces against patron-led mutualism (Harrison, 2009). Like *The Co-operator* from 1828 to 1830, prominent co-operators' involvement in the fight for press freedom from 1830 to 1836 firmed the movement's working class foundations. However, recovering the co-operative ideal's lustre from the twin failures of Owen's villages of co-operation and the Brighton wave would be no small task. This project of cultural restoration and renewal would fall to another crusading journalist for the working class cause, G. J. Holyoake.

The Fourth Wave: The Holyoake Moment, the Rochdale Imaginary, and Consumer Co-operation's Arrival, 1842-1871

The Rochdale Pioneers' iconic status towers over the co-operative imagination. Yet, as Thornes demonstrates "it is ... questionable whether the Pioneers' society did, in fact, mark a significant departure from the main trends within co-operation in the 1820s and 1830s" (2017, p. 48). What is not questionable is that their story uniquely benefited from Holyoake's campaigning journalism.

Holyoake learned his craft on the workbench of the Owenite press, graduating from the demanding academies of the radical unstamped (Hollis, 1970) and the infidel press (Royle, 1974). Stepping in as editor of the *Oracle* after its editor was imprisoned for blasphemous libel, it was Holyoake's turn to serve six months for blasphemous speech in 1842. Holyoake also continued Hetherington's work, joining him and prominent Chartist, Owenite and unstamped agitator, James Watson, on the Newspaper Stamp Abolition Committee. He had helped to ensure the repeal of the 'taxes on knowledge', including the advertisement duty in 1853, the Stamp Act in 1855, the paper duty in 1861, and the securities system in 1869. Altogether, from 1841 to 1877, Holyoake was involved with editing or co-editing half a dozen titles (Holyoake, 1879). He wrote regularly for another half dozen (McCabe, 1922). Over the span of his career, he was either editor or proprietor of at least 18 radical journals (Yeo, 2017a). Sustaining a vibrant alternative press in a period of state repression, he described his papers as "flags carried in battle" (McCabe, 1922, p. 29).

Holyoake also launched the secularist newspaper *The Movement, Anti-Persecution Gazette and Register of Progress* (later *The Reasoner: Gazette of secularism*), perhaps his "greatest achievement" (Yeo, 2017a, p. 110). In fact, he coined the term 'secularism,' as an alternative to the atheism of Owen's 'Rational Religion'. That two decades' long assault on the Church had reduced clerical influence but also limited the working class coalition's reach. Through this secular turn, Holyoake hoped to enlist the moral energies of intellectuals and the religious alike in social reform — an early expression of his 'big tent' quest to broaden the working class movement's base. As Royle argues, Holyoake's secularism was an "agitation for a scheme of rights: the right to think for oneself; the right to differ; the right to assert difference of opinion; the right to debate all vital opinion" (1974, p. 292). As its editor from 1846 to 1861, *The Reasoner* also championed Owenist-socialism and 'moral force' Chartism (Bishopsgate Institute Special Collections and Archives, 1998). One of the nineteenth century's leading periodicals, the weekly reached a peak circulation of about 5,000 copies in 1853 (Royle, 1974).

The son of an engineer and a button-maker, Holyoake viewed secularism, Owenism, and co-operation as one social movement. Co-operation's fate would thus rise and fall with the tides of this wider movement to empower working people (Holyoake, 1879). This implied a sweeping democratisation. For Holyoake, freeing workers from exploitation, press controls, the illusions of religion and autocratic rule were inter-dependent aspects of the struggle for working class emancipation; to build a movement of co-operators thus required loosening the hold of dependent, deferential, and individualistic forms of self-hood. Through six decades of crusading journalism Holyoake waged a broad-front battle for moral and intellectual reconstruction; he aimed to shape a generation of free-thinkers and democrats into a progressive historical bloc. For example, just as Holyoake hoped secularism would unite atheists and the faithful behind the working class cause, he also worked to unite the predominantly working class readers of *The Reasoner* and his more liberal, middle class readers of *The Leader* for co-operation (Legette, 2017). He was truly an organic intellectual for working class co-operation (Yeo, 2017a). Indeed, *The Reasoner* was published from Fleet Street House, where production was organised co-operatively including profit-sharing (Royle, 1974).

Of course, the Pioneers' example provided Holyoake with his most potent propaganda. His serialised account for *The Daily News* helped inspire over 200 co-operative launches; their story was often read aloud on consecutive nights at workers' meetings (Holyoake, 1879). Holyoake's *Self-help for the people: A history of the Rochdale Pioneers* (1893/2018) broke new ground; the best-seller was reprinted several times and translated into five languages (Gurney, 2017). The *New York Tribune's* muckraking publisher Horace Greeley arranged publication of a U.S. edition (Holyoake, 1900). As word spread, yet others replicated their approach. The Rochdale achievement's power as a mythic narrative owes much to Holyoake's journalistic skill, prestige, and devotion to telling their story to ever-expanding audiences. One can only ponder how co-operation's course might have been altered without the "labour of criticism ..., diffusion of culture and spread of ideas" contained in this movement textbook.

Similarly, none of early British co-operation's achievements took place in an ideological or cultural vacuum. They often rested on understandings gleaned from the alternative press, often against strident opposition from Church, State, and the wealthy. In these pages the 'co-operator' gained the knowledge and confidence to step onto the historical stage and the novel rights and responsibilities of 'membership' came to be understood. Less obvious than tallies of membership, sales, or revenues, it was these news-workers' contributions to what Holyoake (1898) called "the co-operative mind" that had made the movement's 'objective' achievements possible.

The Fifth Wave: From a National Movement Press to Co-operative Globalisation, 1871-

In 1869 a group of printers, including former *Manchester Guardian* staff, launched the Co-operative Printing Society (Bishopsgate Institute Special Collections and Archives, 1998). Two years later they commenced printing *Co-operative News* (later *Co-op News*), the movement's first national newspaper (Holyoake, 1879). Holyoake drew up the weekly's prospectus. *Co-operative News* thereby combined English co-operation's now-significant revenue stream with the accumulated know-how of the alternative press tradition that had stoked mutualism's cultural momentum. To ensure the publication's prospects, Holyoake and his partner E. O. Greening rolled up their London-based *Social Economist*. *Co-operative News* built on the *Social Economist's* readership, the free monthly store journals published in Leicester, Derby, Leeds and Ipswich and a regional paper, *The South of England Pioneer*. However, *Co-operative News* gave the co-operative movement its own national voice.

The last individual to hold shares, Holyoake relinquished them in 1876. He nevertheless contributed regularly and served the board until close to his life's end (McCabe, 1922). He provided Congress summaries but also railed against the Co-operative Wholesale Society through the 1890s for failing to follow motions to adopt profit-sharing with its workers (Yeo, 2017a). This posture of critical solidarity reflected his conviction that "good journalism (was) the life of the movement" (Holyoake, 1879, p. 375). If they were to get anywhere, co-operators needed an engine of co-operative education, an intellectual and moral compass, and a well-charted course. As he would recall several years after its launch, "an uninformed party is like a mere sailing boat. It only moves when outside winds blow, and is not always sure where it will be blown to then" (1879, p. 375).

Indeed, press consolidation had fostered an increasingly hostile environment for independent voices. Driven from the commercial news market after the 1936 reduction of the stamp tax, the cheap news niche once occupied by the unstamped was soon filled with Sunday papers and self-improvement publications (Williams, 2013). While the activism of the thirties brought the working class reading public into being, the forties' structural transformation of the British public sphere increasingly fostered their ideological incorporation.

Space does not permit an account of *Co-op News'* long history; the key point is that this multi-stakeholder media innovation would place Britain's co-operative public sphere on a sound, financial footing. A hedge against market-driven journalism, *Co-operative News* would continue to shelter the movement from arbitrary and hostile winds of outside influence. It provided a movement prone to mission drift and democratic degeneration with Holyoake's propeller. 2021 marks this grand idea's 150th year. Now publishing a glossy monthly and a digital edition, the Manchester-based operation is world history's longest-standing news co-operative (Co-op News, 2020). Founded by co-operatives, it remains a sector-based voice. Augmented by a class of subscriber-members and global reach, its adaptability ensured its enduring relevance. Over a century and a half, it has gone from a weekly newspaper experiment in binding English co-operators together to the digital harbinger of a globalising movement — now reaching instantaneously across the English-speaking world. As the world has changed, so too has *Co-op News'* role, editorial scope, audience reach and membership structure. In 2004, the

co-operative began admitting individual members and is governed by four directors from the Co-operative Group (CWS) Limited, one appointed by Co-operatives UK Limited, three from other organisational members, and an individual members' representative. At its discretion, the Board may recruit two additional directors (Co-op News, 2020).

Nevertheless, as the alternative press history sketched above reminds, *Co-operative News* did not emerge magically in 1871 — like Athena springing fully formed from Zeus's forehead. This strategic decision was historically contingent. Without dozens of titles convening a great national conversation about co-operation over the course of half a century, there may not have been a prosperous or visionary enough sector to establish *Co-operative News* 'from above'. Similarly, without the demonstrated achievements of the local store journals and *The Social Economist* in 1871, demand may have been inadequately primed to support *Co-operative News* 'from below'. Without Holyoake's participation in the Owenist press and a myriad of publishing ventures, he would have lacked both the reputation and expertise as an accomplished media activist and editor to lend to the new publication's cause. Indeed, without this apprenticeship there may have been no Holyoake — as his contemporaries came to know him. Moreover, without his far-reaching efforts to launch the Rochdale Pioneers' mythic narrative, that critical new impetus for movement regeneration and expansion may have only sparked a more subdued, limited, and delayed diffusion. In other words, there may not even have been a British co-operative movement — to the extent it developed in Rochdale's wake. *Co-operative News* was therefore not simply a crucial new journalistic platform for an expanding movement, it was itself the culmination of this half century of alternative press agitation.

Conclusion: Where Goes (Alternative) Journalism Follows (Economic) Democracy?

This essay has demonstrated some of alternative journalism's profound contributions to the making of early British co-operation. The Owenist press, the Brighton newspaper boom, the rebellion of the radical unstamped, and Holyoake's life-work each illustrated news-workers' importance to the emerging movement. Indeed, without their symbolic revolution to lay early co-operation's intellectual and moral foundations — against a frequently hostile ideological climate and censorious church and state — there is no guarantee modern British mutualism would exist in its present-day form.

Continuing to knit British leadership cadres across sectoral, geographic, and positional divides, *Co-op News* carries on the mission first assigned it in 1871. Its media activism continues to diffuse information, stimulate reflection, and strengthen mutualist commitments across the movement's mobilising networks. Its counter-hegemonic articulation of the co-operative difference continues to protect Holyoake's movement from the prevailing winds of often hostile outside opinions — instead lending movement progress its democratic propeller. While it is easy to romanticise the heroic feats of the mythic past at contemporary contributions' expense, *Co-op News*' role has great significance in a globalising age. Just as *Co-operative News* first spanned a fragmented British movement to speed co-operation's diffusion, its subsequent title now bridges gulfs of geography, language, and culture. In 2019, readers from every country in the world except four visited the *Co-op News* site (Co-op News, 2020). As history illustrates, good ideas do not simply spread. Movement expansion relies on the painstaking efforts of organic intellectuals working through counter-hegemonic channels to shift the culture — from *The Economist* to *New Moral World*, *The Co-operator*, *The Poor Man's Guardian* and *The Reasoner*. In *Co-op News* and across the alternative press, this cultural and ideological struggle to expand and regenerate co-operation continues.

Certainly, the wider alternative press tradition also continues to evolve — including the emerging sector of news co-operatives. Initiatives including *The Bristol Cable* (established 2014) and Scotland's *The Ferret* (est. 2015) emerged in the wake of a recent British campaign (Boyle, 2012). Monthly magazine *New Internationalist* (est. 1973) is published by a multi-stakeholder

co-operative. Daily newspapers such as Italy's storied *Il Manifesto* (est. 1963), Berlin's left-green *Die Tageszeitung (Taz)* (est. 1978), and Uruguay's *La Diaria* (est. 2006) are also published by co-operatives. In fact, *La Diaria* is Uruguay's second place national newspaper (La Diaria, 2020). Similarly, France's *Alternatives Économique* (est. 1980) is that country's second most read magazine (*Alternatives Économique*, 2019). *Brecha* (est. 1985) is one of Uruguay's two most influential weeklies (Federación de Cooperativas de Producción del Uruguay, 2019).

Not surprisingly, news co-operatives are often in the editorial forefront of advancing alternatives to investor-led development. Just as established media continue to reflect and advance dominant class interests so too do co-operative news-workers continue the "labour of criticism, diffusion of culture and spread of ideas" necessary for further democratic advance. Their experiences also prove media alternatives need not be marginal. Moreover, these and other news co-operators have shown the resilience to plot a sustainable path through investor-driven journalism's contemporary crisis. Add to these achievements, for example, Argentina's swarm of recuperated newspapers or the ambitious 2020 co-operative conversion of six Québec newspapers in Canada and you glimpse the structure of co-operative opportunity in the emerging context of post-pandemic reconstruction (Assis, 2018; Banks, 2019). Certainly, history suggests the news sector has earned more careful consideration from the movement which media activists such as Owen, King, Hetherington, and Holyoake helped bring into the world. Indeed, *Co-op News* is today published from a permanent headquarters named to honour Holyoake's contributions to British co-operation. Holyoake House is a monument to one leading organic intellectual's vast editorial, ideological and cultural contributions to movement-building. It is also a metaphor for co-operation's debt to the historic practice — and enduring importance — of alternative journalism.

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