

## Raymond Williams and the Popular Press – an explainer

**Academic, writer and cultural historian Raymond Williams (1921 – 1988) maintained his keen concern for the past, present and potential future of the popular press - mass-circulation newspapers and magazines - throughout his life and work. Here, PAUL RICHARDS explains how Williams' approached the modern media and what he says to us today.**

Raymond Williams' approach to the press, and the media more broadly, was Marxian, but evolved from received Marxist theory. That means he saw the popular press in the context of how the economy was structured, people's relations to the way things were made and sold, and the existence of antagonistic social classes in our society. As his thinking developed, Williams moved beyond traditional Marxist theory, in ways we shall explore.

He developed a robust critique of the central role of the media as a force which not only reflects, but also shapes our society. Williams' theoretical and historical writings consistently fuelled his political activism and demands for practical reform, such as newspapers owned as co-ops by their own workers not media barons.

Williams developed his thinking beyond the traditional Marxist perspective that the mass media was a crude tool of the ruling class, designed to create a 'false consciousness' amongst the masses. He saw it in more complex and nuanced terms, and believed it could be regulated, reformed and democratised within his own lifetime, rather than in some future post-revolutionary utopia. As such, Raymond Williams informed and inspired activists in his own times, and bequeaths his ideas and frameworks to subsequent generations.

Crucially, Williams came to view communications, including the media, as a productive force in its own right, rather than just a reflection or product of society, in a process he coined as '*cultural materialism*'. He contested the orthodox Marxist idea that culture was merely a flimsy 'superstructure' built on the sound foundations of the 'substructure' of the means of production. He believed in '*the centrality of language and communication as formative social forces*'.

Williams elevated popular culture as everything we say, write and do, and the media as an essential element of human development and progress, worthy of research and understanding, and a crucial tool in forging a new, democratic, classless and egalitarian society. Williams viewed the development of the press in Britain as a significant component of the development of this popular culture, alongside other media such as radio, television, theatre and the arts, explored in his important book *The Long Revolution* (1961). He wrote in *The Long Revolution*:

*'the development of the press in England, in particular the growth of the popular press, is of major importance in any account of our general cultural expansion.'*

His long view of history, from the development of the printing press onwards, led to his desire for media reform, born of his conviction that the concentration of the ownership of the media in too few, capitalist, hands was a barrier to social progress, and that the reverse was true: a genuinely popular press, democratically owned and controlled, with high standards of journalism, could serve as a means of educating and engaging the people in a vibrant, democratic society.

This view reflects the predominant position across the left, from the 1940s to the 1980s, when Williams was researching and writing. For example, the Labour Party's paper on *The People and the Media* (1974) stated that:

*'Access to information, and the freedom to communicate a variety of views, opinions and ideas are of fundamental importance especially to a democratic society. A well-informed population is a prerequisite of a genuine democracy. The concentration of power over mass media therefore is a cause of great concern...the creation of semi-monopolies in newspapers and, as is increasingly happening, across number of media creates a dangerous concentration of power and threatens freedom of expression.'*

Throughout his life, Williams sought answers to this issue of media ownership and control. His first speech to the Cambridge Union in 1940 mentioned the manipulative power of advertising, the concentration of ownership, and libel laws which favoured the rich and powerful, and he would return to these themes for the next 40 years.

He believed that the advertising industry had transcended mere commercialism and had begun to inculcate society with capitalist values. His bestselling Penguin Special *Britain in the Sixties: Communications* (1962) called for a democratic approach to media and the arts. He joined the Arts Council from 1976-78, and was a founder of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (CPBF) in 1979. By the 1980s Williams was concerned with the new satellite television stations, and called for their control by the public not corporations. His ideas were always linked to his activism.

Williams was keen, in *The Long Revolution*, to demonstrate that the expansion of the popular press was not caused by the spread of mass literacy, and in particular the effects of the 1870 Education Act, a widespread theory that he dismissed as '*nonsense*'. Instead, he pointed to three '*vital transforming factors*': first, improved industrial methods of production and distribution of printed material, second, what he called '*social chaos and the widening franchise*' (in other words the struggle for democracy), and third, the need for capitalist organisations to advertise new goods and services to newly emergent groups of consumers. Williams also pointed to the emergence of a '*new kind of speculator*', the media owner, investing in the popular press from the 1830s onwards, a product of capitalist economic structures and systems.

In *The Long Revolution* Williams analysed the development of the press through the industrial revolution, and up to the 1950s, and asked the following question:

*'Is it all come to this, in the end, that the long history of the press in Britain should reach its consummation in a declining number of newspapers, in ownership by a very few large groups, and in the acceptance (varied between social groups but evidence in all) of the worst kinds of journalism?'*

What led Williams to this gloomy conclusion (the question mark is purely rhetorical)?

Certainly, the 'popular' culture of the post-war era was dominated by tabloid red tops, American cinema, the elitist BBC, anodyne commercial television, and male-dominated activities such as football, horse-racing and the pub. You can hear the same pessimism creep into the rhetoric of the likes of Aneurin Bevan by the 1950s, after the fall of the Attlee government. And yet, Williams kept the faith that another version of popular culture was possible, germinated from the seeds of institutions like the National Theatre, the Workers' Education Association (WEA), and the Open University, and rooted in the ideals of the radical press, the co-op and the trade unions.

Williams was always at pains to locate his work on culture in the context of the socio-economic realities of time and place. One could not be divorced from the other, as he wrote in *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958):

*'the history of our idea of culture is a record of our meanings and our definitions, but these, in turn, are only to be understood within the context of our actions'.*

As a child in the 1920s and 1930s, and a young adult in the 1940s and 1950s, Williams grew up in an age when mass circulation newspapers were the dominant source of news and information, alongside the radio and cinema newsreels. Williams was born in 1921, and by the time he was 18, only four men owned half of all national and local newspapers sold in Britain, as well as one in three Sunday newspapers. These four 'media barons' sold 13 million newspapers a day between them. In the 1930s, two-thirds of the population read a newspaper every day, and the vast majority took a Sunday newspaper. George Orwell described the familiar scene of the pre-war, post-prandial reader, filled with roast beef and Yorkshire puddings, feet up on the sofa, spectacles settled on the nose, wife asleep, opening the *News of the World* to read about a grisly murder. Williams lived and wrote in a world where the newspaper was as pervasive and ubiquitous as the internet is today.

Williams dismissed the idea that the popular newspapers were filled with salacious gossip, lurid scandals and opinion masquerading as news purely because that's what an uninformed and ill-educated populace demanded. He grew up amongst the vibrant auto-didactic culture of the South Wales proletariat, with its self-funded libraries, choirs, theatres and evening classes. He had proven faith in the intelligence and intellectual curiosity of working-class people, whom he refused to reduce

to ‘the masses’. As evidence, he pointed to the significant circulation of local newspapers, with their much higher standard of journalism, purchased by the same people as the ‘popular’ press.

He was also sure to point out that the supposed correlation of the ‘popular’ press with the working class and the ‘quality’ press with the middle and upper class, what he termed ‘*simple class affiliations*’ was not sound. Williams pointed out that the leading newspaper of the ‘*rich and well-to-do*’ was not the *Times* or *Telegraph* but the tabloid *Express*. Even today, the *Sun* has many times more ABC1 readers than the *Guardian* or *Independent*.

In the *Listener* magazine in 1970, Williams describes the ‘*commercial*’ press as belonging to a ‘*vanished time*’:

*‘the family of England with its heroes, its black sheep and its leading ladies. A general air of below stairs: what the political master was overheard to say at the study window; who’s in line for the inheritance; which young ladies are coming for the weekend, and what will they be wearing?’*

This is the ‘*worst kind of journalism*’ that he railed against for 40 years, and the antithesis of the emancipatory democratic culture he craved. In the same article he advocated ‘*what is now an urgent business: making a different popular press.*’

How does Williams speak to us today? In his *Listener* article, in 1970, he wrote, with great prescience

*‘I think we can be sure that if the world ever becomes an electronic village, there will still, while the popular press lasts, be a squire’s lady at the hall.’*

The ‘*electronic village*’ is where we all now live. The popular press is online, and as influential as ever, despite falling newspaper sales. The barons are still with us. Rupert Murdoch, owner of the *Sun*, *Times*, HarperCollins and Fox News, is worth \$13 billion. In 2019-2020, the *Daily Mail*, with its heady brew of celebrity, xenophobia, and distorted reporting, still owned by a Rothermere, was read by over two million people a day, including 1.4 million ABC1 readers. The popular press is joined by the new social media platforms that dominate our daily culture, fuel conspiracy theories, subvert our elections, and distort our social priorities.

Writing today, Williams would have brought his customary rigour: a critique of the methods and motives of the new media owners like Zuckerberg and Dorsey and their voracious tendency to centralise and monopolise ownership and production; the absence of editorial or journalistic standards in the new Wild West of offshore ownership and factories producing ‘fake news’; and the dangerous development of a seductive online world where black is white and up is down, and all critical faculties are dulled. He would have denounced the Trumpian vilification of the ‘mainstream media’, and all populist calls to bypass the media altogether, seeing it as the first steps to fascism. Instead, we might

have seen Williams proselytise for a social media which is enlivening not deadening, democratically-controlled not accountable-to-none, and part of a vibrant society where arts and culture are seen as more important than cat memes and the Kardashians. He would surely have approved of the #metoo movement, and the organising potential of social media for tackling police oppression or the climate emergency. He would have well understood why the military in Myanmar closed down Facebook and other platforms where resistance and dissent was fermenting.

We will never know for sure. In the meantime, we can draw on Williams's fulsome writings on the popular press and the media, and do what above all he would want us to do: think for ourselves.

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