

**The Press Gang**  
**The World in Journalese**

**Philip Howard**

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## **Author's Note**

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# THE PRESS GANG

## The World in Journalese

### Does Journalese exist?

The answer to this question had better be “yes”. For otherwise, what are we doing wasting our time reading, or indeed writing, a monograph about it? And the robust answer to the question is, of course, “Yes, Journalese exists.” There is no need to spend our first 500 pages, as in the book about translation, discussing whether translation is possible. *Of course* it is possible, at least at one level. Otherwise what are we doing reading, or indeed writing, a doorstopper about it? At the very least Journalese exists in the same category as unicorns or boojums. We may not meet creatures of either species in safari parks or nature programmes on television. But we have a pretty good idea of what unicorns are from medieval romances and bestiaries (and Walt Disney’s *Fantasia* and the royal arms). And we know that a boojum is an imaginary animal, a particularly dangerous kind of “snark”, from Lewis Carroll’s *The Hunting of the Snark*. So Journalese is not a category mistake as is, for example, the absurd phrase: “the pinkness of time squeaks until it sleeps.” (Though note that somebody might claim that that last sentence was a metaphor or poetry. “Time crawls” is a category mistake. But it is also an intelligible metaphor.)

### So what is Journalese?

The term is a put-down, not a compliment. The word was invented shortly before 1882 to describe the language in which more people do their reading than any other. In benighted parts of the country, far from universities, a “book” still means a magazine from the news agent’s. The Oxford English Dictionary defines Journalese: “The style of language supposed to be characteristic of public journals; ‘newspaper’ or ‘penny-a-liner’s’ English.” Freelance rates have not improved much, but the idea of a lineage fee of a penny a

line shows how long ago that definition was made. Greedy celebrities with dragon agents demand (and, if the commissioning editor is desperate enough, occasionally get) a pound a word these days. Webster's gives a fuller and more detailed definition of Journalese: "English of a style featured by use of colloquialisms, superficiality of thought or reasoning, clever or sensational presentation of material, and evidence of haste in composition, considered characteristic of newspaper writing." All the earliest examples are pejorative. *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 1882: "Translated from 'Journalese' into plain English." Rudyard Kipling, who was a journalist before he turned short-story writer and poet, wrote in *Many Inventions*, 1893: "I refrained from putting any Journalese into it." It is curious how little use of journalism Kipling made in his fiction. (Perhaps a monograph there, Ed?) The inky trade features in only one of his stories, though that is a very funny one: *The Village that Voted the Earth was Flat*.

### **Examples, please**

Tabloidese, which is the liveliest dialect of Journalese, fantasises that the reporter is a hard-bitten hack (played by James Cagney, Kirk Douglas, or Humphrey Bogart), with his trilby tilted to the back of his head, and a Lucky Strike stuck to his bottom lip, shouting 'Hold the Front Page!' down the telephone to his copy-taker. It is essentially a made-up language, a primitive Esperanto, composed of short, sharp, macho words, such as "rap", "probe", and "bid". In Journalese, nouns, verbs, and adjectives are interchangeable. It is punchy, short, and old-fashioned. For example, although corporal punishment has been banned in British schools for many years, its memory lives on (especially on frosty mornings) among the middle-aged men who generally become sub-editors (they prepare cub reporters' "copy" for printing). Their boyhood reading was Billy Bunter and other ripping yarns, in which canes were constantly swishing against Bunter's tight checkered trousers. Yarooch! So caning, flogging and thrashing live on in Journalese, although they are obsolete in life. "Getting a caning" is what "Sir" (anyone in authority) gets when all that actually happens to him is that he is reprimanded, disadvantaged, or "slammed".

Nobody other than Reginald Perrin ever “went missing”. But “going missing” is Journalese for “disappear”. Journalists would rename Janacek’s *The Man who Disappeared* in Journalese: “The Man who Went Missing.” When the football manager is sacked, Journalese describes him as “tight-lipped and ashen faced”, even if his face is crimson with rage or drink, and his lips loose enough to utter a stream of four-letter words, as he “storms out” or is “whisked away”. When a diarist writes, “I hear that...” in Journalese, in plain English he means, “I read in a public-relations hand-out...” Continual puns are a sub-genre of Journalese. Does it add anything to a review of the Amadeus Quartet to caption them as “stringing along”? “Colonic irritation” anyone? “Somme like it hot” about the carnage of 1916 was the worst-taste Journalese pun in the past year, on the level of *The Sun’s* “GOTCHA!” to describe sending 600 young men to their deaths in the Belgrano. No report of nudity is complete without a reference to “the cold shoulder”, just as you cannot mention exposed buttocks without “barefaced cheek”.

“A shot in the arm” competes with “shooting oneself in the foot”. The latter is a badly aimed metaphor. In the 1914-18 War, whence the expression comes, to shoot oneself in the foot was a deliberate act of self-mutilation in order to escape from the trenches. But it has become Journalese for a self-damaging accident or cock-up. In the real world, mayors and lavatories are losing their chains. But any reference to them in the public prints still evokes the Journalese pun of “chain reaction”. Subbing is concentrated work under the “lash” of the deadline. It can be boring as well as demanding. It is possible that some of the puns are written to amuse or show off to rival journalists rather than entertain “ordinary people” (Journalese cliché<sup>1</sup>: pray define an extraordinary person, and I do not count a Pop celeb as such).

### **What do you think about it?**

Newspapers ought to be written in the everyday language of their readers, not in a private, esoteric code. Their readers are no longer highly educated ruling élites, perusing their (ironed) paper of record

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1. Cliché, as pronounced by the late Lord George-Brown.

in their leather arm chairs at leisure, before going in to lunch in the Coffee Room of the Garrick. They are working people struggling to read in the cattle-trucks of the rush hour. So journalism ought to be in simple English, not complicated; with short, not long sentences; using concrete, not abstract words. Different sections will use different registers of English. So, much of a football report will be gobbledygook to the reader of an opera review, whereas the opera review will seem strangely obscure and pointless to fans of David Beckham.

For a modern daily newspaper is a huge hamper, containing thousands of little packets and boxes of Tupperware with delicacies for all tastes. It wants to appeal to as many different types of reader as possible. You are not expected to read or enjoy all the picnic. But you should be able to understand all its delicacies, except perhaps that financial nonsense on the City pages, which is as unintelligible as the Rosetta Stone to all except those seriously interested in money. So a newspaper should be written in the everyday written language of its target readerships. However, any trade or profession develops its jargon as a shorthand. And some of this leaks out into the general discourse. This paper will argue that Journalese comes in many kinds, good, bad, and indifferent. It should always be looked at through narrowed eyes, before you press the “send” key on the computer to print it. Good Journalese should be natural, lively and a pleasure to read. If you have to read a sentence twice in order to catch its drift, that is bad Journalese, as well as being a bloody nuisance on the Tube, with your feet not touching the ground, and other men’s heads stuck between you and the paper.

### **What is Journalese for?**

For many reasons, some good, some bad. Here are a few of them:

#### **1. *To attract attention.***

Formerly the town crier used to ring a bell to summon the citizens to hear the latest news. When the BBC started to broadcast, news readers on the wireless had to wear dinner jackets for their listeners. And on a quiet news-day, they ran out of news before the end of their bulletin. So they would announce: “There are no more news

tonight. So we are going to play you some Mozart.” No fear of that today. News has increased so that there is no escape from it around the clock. Our newsmen produce more news than we can consume at a single sitting. And dozens of news media compete for our attention: newspapers, television, radio, the Internet, gossip. Hence comes the drama-seeking headline cliché, such as FAMOUS ACTOR DEAD or EASTENDERS STAR WEDS, referring to media celebs we have never heard of. G.K.Chesterton said it first in 1914: “Journalism largely consists in saying ‘Lord Jones Dead’ to people who never knew that Lord Jones was alive.” So note the use of DAY in Journalese to hook the attention of the passer-by, and force him/her to buy a copy. THE DAY THE TUBE BLEW A FUSE. THE DAY THE WHEEL WAS REINVENTED. THE DAY THE BISHOP CALLED ON A BLONDE.

## ***2. To sound trendy***

Journalists have to pretend to know everything about everything. In fact (though please do not broadcast this) they know surprisingly little about many things. So they pretend to omniscience by the slap and crackle of their Journalese. It is the language of insider name-dropping and letting you, the reader, into secrets. It is a cynical code that reads as though it should be wise-cracked out of the side of the mouth by Bogart or Kirk Douglas playing ace reporter. It is tough-guy. For example “Get the chop” and “Go through the mincer” are Journalese metaphors from the butcher’s.

## ***3. Economy and brevity***

This is a good reason. Early newspapers had no headlines. Modern newspapers, especially the tabloids and Red-Tops (down-market tabloids for the lager-lout classes) now have huge headlines to emphasise the importance of their splash (front-page story). As in FREDDY STARR ATE MY HAMPSTER. If Freddy Starr had eaten my HIPPOPOTAMUS the headline would have “bust”, i.e. not fitted on the page. The headline bellows, DROP EVERYTHING: YOU MUST READ THIS. Or, more often than subs realise, WASTE NO TIME ON READING THIS RUBBISH. For huge print you need small words. For ANNOYANCE (9 letters) in Journalese read STORM (5). It is shorter and noisier. For ENCOURAGE (9 letters) read

BOOST (5). For CRITICISE (9) read SLAM, BLAST, or HIT OUT. AXE or SCRAP are Journalese for DISMISS, CANCEL, or RESHUFFLE. The last is Lobby jargon. After you have shuffled the cards at Bridge, how often do you reshuffle? DEVELOPMENT (11) is useless for headlines. MOVE is preferable. NON-PARTICIPANTS (15) is hopeless. REBELS (6) is shorter and sounds more exciting.

#### **4. *To avoid thought***

This is a bad reason. Daily journalists have to churn out copy at frightening speed. An issue of *The Times* contains as many words as three large novels. We do not start writing them until after lunch. And you know what journos' lunches are popularly (though these days untruly) supposed to be. So it is not surprising that writing in haste to catch the edition we sometimes scribble: "With regard to the discussion which took place at yesterday's meeting in reference to the position arising out of the present situation, the result, so far as the practical point of view is concerned, was of a purely negative character." Better would be: "Nothing came of yesterday's discussion."

#### **Is Journalese a good thing?**

What a silly question. It is there. So, it is probably, like most human creations, partly good, and partly bad. Journalese has its uses and abuses. When it is good, it can be very, very good. And when it is bad, it is horrid. You may regard British Tabs (tabloid newspapers) and Red-Tops (the coarser tabloids) as the scum of the printed word and an insult to intelligence. But millions of your fellow citizens enjoy them. And in the inky trade they are regarded as the best in the world. Their editors and other executives are head-hunted by English-speaking tabloids all over the world. Aspirant pop journalists from Australia to Alaska are sent to train in the Diaspora of Fleet Street. No national newspaper has printed in Fleet Street for twenty years. But note the curious antiquarianism of Journalese, as in the sub-editors recycling Bunter in headlines. The man who is reading *The Daily Brute* today may tire of the crap and read *The Thunderer* tomorrow.

## **An abuse of Journalese**

Because of its extreme compression, Journalese can mislead, particularly those readers who are not as used to its private codes and grammar as the hacks. This danger of misunderstanding is most common in headlines, because of their extremely abbreviated and truncated essence. To make a reader stumble or force her to read a headline or picture caption twice is Cardinal Sin 94 of Journalese. Here are some recent potentially misleading headlines:

POLICE SQUAD HELPS DOG BITE VICTIM. [The cannibals.]

LUCKY MAN SEES PALS DIE. [The masochistic sod.]

CHILD TEACHING EXPERT TO SPEAK. [What sort of expert is that?]

BISHOP DEFROCKS GAY PRIEST. [Hullo, Vicar.]

RUGBY TEAM'S COACH SET ON FIRE. [I know that Rob Andrew is the most boring fly-half ever to play for England, always kicking, never passing the ball out to his brilliant backs. It is a tragedy that the selectors usually preferred him to Stuart Barnes. But even Andrew seldom deserves to be burned.]

WOMAN BETTER AFTER BEING THROWN FROM HIGH RISE. [What on Earth was she like before being defenestrated?]

CHILD'S STOOL GREAT FOR USE IN GARDEN. [So at last I know what to do with the dirty nappies.]

KID'S PAJAMAS TO BE REMOVED BY WOOLWORTH. [Corporate child abuse.]

EIGHTH ARMY PUSH BOTTLES UP GERMANS [*Evening Standard*]

POLICE DISCOVER CRACK IN DEVON [The River Sid?]

## **Sex Romps**

Sex, disaster and ghastly crime are believed to sell newspapers. They are the foundation building-blocks of the Tabs and Red-Tops, which dish the dirt daily on the amorous proclivities and perversities of Soap and Pop stars whom nobody has heard of. So it is a paradox of Journalese that their Editors cannot bring themselves to use the plain English words for the activities that they find endlessly fascinating.

Broadsheet newspapers can print the taboo sexual four-letter words in full, if there is a reason for doing so. But the decision to publish them should not be taken lightly, wantonly, or ill-advisedly, or without the consent of the Editor. For there are still a number of readers out there who purport to be so shocked by the words that when they read them they will write in in a rage cancelling their subscriptions AGAIN. As usual *The Times* plays its part in this secret corner of Journalese. On January 13, 1882 our interminable report of an interminable speech by the Attorney General was interspersed at intervals with the sentence: “The speaker then said that he felt like a bit of [f-word with -ing at the end].” This untrue and shocking assertion was spotted by the night “readers”, and removed from the second edition. But our apology for this unspecified “gross outrage” four days later will have puzzled almost all readers, who will not have read the original report of a speech as boring as most at party conferences, apart from its outrageous interpolations. Future scholars of taboo words in Journalese can find the name and history of the suspected perpetrator (a disgruntled compositor who had been given his cards) in *The Times* archives.

Broadsheets can publish the taboo words, for example between inverted commas, if an ashen-faced and tight-lipped football manager has uttered them as expletives. But the Tabs, which revel in sexual tittle-tattle and innuendo, cannot publish them. So they have invented a cunning code of Journalese. They publish the initial letter of the words, followed by three asterisks, thus: f\*\*\*, c\*\*\*, and s\*\*\*. Readers of down-market rags are not usually Fellows of All Souls. But even they can probably work out which word is meant. Furthermore Journalese has invented a string of twee euphemisms to describe the sexual acts it gloats over. “Sex romps” is understood to mean sexual intercourse.

Other synonyms and euphemisms for sex in Journalese include Hanky Panky, Kiss ‘n Cuddle, and Nookie. And the obsession with sex is written up in the Sex Romping Register of Journalese, nothing as frank and full-frontal as Mills & Boon, but a kind of Penthouse Gothic. This is the particular house style employed by the fantasy departments of the softcore monthlies. It is laced with suggestive puns. Here is a recent example from the *News of the World*. “He plied me with brandy, and brandy makes me randy.

Then he nudged up and pecked my cheek. He got really excited and we ended up in his bedroom. But he was so small, and it was all over in 30 seconds. I got up, found my knickers in the sitting-room and went home. Afterwards he apologised for his chipolata. And that's what I called him." The first name of the lover was Rod. And not even the bedroom is a zone free from Journalese. The headline-writer could not resist a bad pun. CHIPOLATA LOVER – SEX PEST MODEL'S BITTER BLAST AT SMALL ROD.

### **Does Journalese affect ordinary English?**

1. It would be odd if so widespread and popular a register of written English did not have some effect on the common pool of language.
2. I do not know how you would set about proving this proposition (1). But I have no doubt that some university linguistics department somewhere (probably at Leeds) is engaged on such a survey.
3. But if Journalese is affecting English, does it matter? Is it not a disgrace?
4. Don't be so wet. "Ordinary people" (Jornalese) are more sensible than you suppose. They do not take "the Currant Bun" and other Red Tops seriously, but as a bit of a giggle, confirming the irrational bees and maggots in their bonnets. The steadily declining circulation of the sillier Tabs indicates that the appetite for reading about the shambolic "private" lives of idiotic Soap and Pop stars is in secular decline. Hurray.

### **Should we, like Kipling, try to avoid Journalese?**

A successful newspaper is written in the natural style of its readers. But readers come with many styles. The review of a Pop record will be written in a different style from an obituary or a law report (a special case, since law reports are written by lawyers in legal jargon, and can be used in court as case law).

Headlines are a pungent style of journalism, because of the extreme pressure on space for words in big, bold type. But all journalism should be in short, sharp, plain English. When he was Editor of *The Times*, William Rees-Mogg at one stage laid down a

law that no sentence in the paper should contain more than twelve words – except, of course, for his thunderous leaders demanding the return to the Gold Standard, or predicting that Master William Hague was destined to be a future Prime Minister. This was a sound idea, but it proved hopeless in practice. Sub-editors spent too much time counting words. Journalese, like English itself, is a great lake, in which elephants can swim and lambs can paddle. Because of the ferocious speed at which it has to be written, and the lash of the deadline (Journalese reference to galley-slaves, I think), long sentences, subordinate clauses, and abstract reasoning are best avoided, except perhaps in leading articles.

For these reasons, unlike his friend Kipling, Henry James was ill-equipped to be a journalist. Early in the 20th century he was invited to contribute a “tribute” (signed encomium) to the *Times* obituary of a literary personage. He was asked for 500 words. Being Henry James, of course he wrote 5,000. So the unfortunate Obituaries Editor sent him the galleys (proofs, long strips of yellowing lavatory-type paper) with his tribute printed on them. And a fawning letter: “Dear Mr. James... Magnificent tribute... Pure literature... Very important... Unfortunately it is rather longer than we have room for... Could you possibly be obliging enough to mark optional cuts on these galleys to bring the piece down to a size that can fit in the paper?” James’s reply is on the galleys in the archives of *The Times*. He has marked only one sentence with square brackets, in neat blue pencil, as an optional cut. Admittedly it is a Jamesian sentence, and therefore pretty long. It is literature, not Journalese. But it is nothing like as big a cut as the Obituaries Editor was hoping for or would accommodate the tribute in the paper. In the margin James has written in his punctilious sloping hand: “You may, if you **MUST**, remove this sentence, without totally destroying the flow of the tribute. **BUT** [in caps] **YOURS IS A BUTCHER’S** [underlined three times] **TRADE.**”

## **Typos**

All printing is liable to misprint. Even manuscript can have its errors from scribes repeating the same letter by mistake (dittography) or missing out words between two instances of the same character. Textual critics make their living from hunting such

errors in ancient texts down the millennia. But misprints are generally supposed to be a speciality of daily papers. See above about the haste and flap in which we work. So *The Guardian* is affectionately nicknamed *The Grauniad*, because of its proclivity to typos. One of the most famous in *The Times* occurred in our report of Queen Victoria opening the new bridge over the Menai Straits. Our chief colour writer wrote in his stateliest purple: “Her Majesty then passed over the bridge.” At least, that is what he meant to write. But an error in typesetting altered one vowel, and had Queen Victoria doing something far more sensational over the bridge.

I wrote a piece in which the phrase “press gang” occurred more than once. It was subbed by Sam Obu, a Ghanaian, whose English grammar was better than that of most of the staff. He has gone on to become an Editor in his homeland. But Sam’s history and background are Gold Coast not British. And in Ghana they knew all about slavers, but nothing about press gangs. Sam thought that I was being slangy, and altered “press gang” to “a party of journalists” throughout the piece, giving it a surrealist flavour. I dictated a report of the annual meeting of the Classical Association from Leeds University. It contained references to the Dead Sea Scrolls. But I have a Mediterranean R and cannot pronounce my Rs in an intelligible way. So the report went into every edition of *The Times* referring to the “Dead Sea Squirrels”. The sarcastic correspondence about this error ran for months in the bottom right-hand corner of the letters page.

The recent typo that I enjoyed most occurred in the obituary of a “Moustache” (Journalese for war hero). We meant to describe him as a “battle-scarred veteran”. By a typo this came up as a “battle-SCARED veteran”. Naturally there were indignant protests from Major-General Moustache’s family, friends, and solicitor. But our grovelling apology and correction on the following day made matters worse. “We should, of course, have referred to Major-General Moustache as a BOTTLE-scarred veteran.”

## **Leaderese**

The language of leading articles (called editorials in the United States) is an elevated branch of Journalese. It is longer, less slangy, and (dare we say it?) more pompous than the Journalese of other

sections. It is Journalese dressed to kill in its morning coat and spats. Most newspapers take the lofty view that the world would be a far, far better place if only it were run from their editorial offices. Anybody who has ever been inside a newspaper office will recognise this as an implausible view. But *The Skibbereen Eagle* gave a classic example of this editorial journocentricity. Skibbereen is a small town beyond the black bog in the West of Ireland. The *Eagle* is its local paper. In August 1914 its leading article trumpeted: “We give this solemn warning to Kaiser Wilhelm: *The Skibbereen Eagle* has its eye on you.” No doubt this warning came as a thunderbolt to the chancelleries of Europe. But it was good Leaderese, treating its readers as the centre of the world, and its editorial as their trumpeter and fogleman.

The notion that a newspaper should have a strong opinion on any subject under the sun or indeed under *The Sun* is a curious convention of Journalese. Our advice to the electorate of Pyidaungsu Myanma Naingngandaw (Burma to you) or Burkina Faso on how to vote may not be critical to the result of their elections, since we do not have many readers there.

Most newspapers in most languages publish editorials in Leaderese telling their readers what to think. Some local papers now personalise their opinion pieces, with picture bylines of the writer taken twenty years ago, when she/he was young and blonde. This tends to weaken the force of the paper’s opinion. It is more cunning to let the reader suppose that the leading article was written anonymously by the Angel Gabriel or some even higher authority, such as the Editor himself.

Leaderese, like its mother genre of Journalese, did not spring fully armed out of the press. Its high hortatory and admonitory style grew out of the storm of pamphlets of the Civil War and the French Revolution. Revolutions throw up leaders in print as well as at the barricades. In England the abolition of the Star Chamber in 1641 made it safer to publish opinions contrary to Establishment wisdom, without being thrown into the Tower or worse. You can trace the rise of Leaderese to the sermon, that branch of English which was the source of news and opinions before newspapers. Puritan and Anglican divines of the 17th and 18th centuries were particularly eloquent at this literary genre.

An archaeologist of English style could trace the ancestry of

Leaderese back to the medieval trivium, the threefold road to eloquence for young men on the make in the Middle Ages. Beyond that you can track it to Roman schoolboys debating whether Julius Caesar (or, as it might be today, Tony Blair) was a good thing. And beyond that the Sophists of 5th century Athens teaching “ordinary people” what to think. Socrates was made to drink hemlock for his alarmingly right-wing leaders. Critics of the press think that this sanction might encourage modern Editors to behave better.

*The Times*, founded in 1785, is the oldest surviving British daily newspaper. So, with other newspapers that have folded or been amalgamated out of existence, it founded the leading article that we know and love today. And the language in which it is written: Leaderese. Like many good things, it happened by accident. John Walter, the founding father, did not set out to invent anything as dodgy as a daily newspaper. He was a bankrupt coal merchant in the City of London. So in order to revive his fortunes and pay his creditors, he bought the patent to a novel form of printing called Logography. This was sensational high tech of the period. Since Gutenberg printers had been setting type letter by letter, picking each letter out of its pigeon-hole with tweezers. Logography said: “Why not save time by keeping the commoner words already made up in type for instant use?” So, for example, Leaderese would have a large supply of “moreover”s and “notwithstanding”s already set in type.

In order to advertise his ingenious new system of Logography, on January 1, 1785, Walter published a flysheet called *The Daily Universal Register*. He stated the object of his exercise in his mission statement, the first leading article: “A News-Paper ought to be the Register of the times, and faithful recorder of every species of intelligence; it ought not to be engrossed by any particular object; but, like a well covered table, it should contain something suited to every palate: observations on the dispositions of our own and of foreign courts should be provided for the political reader; debates should be reported for the amusement or information of those who may be particularly fond of them; and a due attention should be paid to the interests of trade, which are so greatly promoted by advertisements.” Newspaper proprietors are still keen on attracting ads. Roy Thomson, when he owned *The Times*, claimed that he never read any of the editorial. But he measured the

advertising space with a ruler every day. John Walter's first leader would have its string of clauses broken into separate sentences by modern best practice. But its ex cathedra certainty that it alone knows what it is talking about is classic Leaderese.

Logography was a failure, being overtaken by quicker systems of printing. But the news sheet to advertise it was an idea that caught the tide. This was a period of revolution and war, which traditionally sell newspapers. So Walter dumped Logography, but stuck with his news sheet. He renamed it *The Times* on January 1, 1788. Early issues seldom carried leading articles or leaders. And when they did, these read suspiciously as though they were dictated by the contemporary spin doctors at Downing Street, the Foreign Office, and Horse Guards. But *The Times* was a runaway success, and established a huge circulation for the period, making huge profits. Before the revolution of industrial printing, newspapers had such small circulations that they could not make a profit. By its mass print runs, and the hot news and sharp opinions that made it essential reading for the growing public clamouring for Reform, *The Times* broke the chains of newspaper patronage. It became independent, with independent views expressed in Leaderese. This was red revolution and anathema to the old Three Estates of the Realm. The leading articles in *The Times* were attacked for their irresponsibility and gutter journalism. During the crises of the Crimean War and the long struggle for Reform, Queen Victoria would not allow what she described as "the atrocious *Times*" into her palaces.

A defining moment for the emergence of leaders and Leaderese as platoons of Journalese occurred in 1852. Prince Louis Napoleon seized power in France by a coup d'état. Queen Victoria, Her Government, and Her Loyal Opposition approved of him, as preferable to wild democracy and another French Revolution. *The Times*, never a friend of dictators until the Appeasement Years, did not. So John Delane, the Editor, and his leader writers riddled Louis Napoleon with a salvo of thunderous leaders. Napoleon complained to Victoria, asked the Government to intervene, and tried to bribe the Editor of *The Times* to lay off.

In the Debate on the Address that year, both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition put the case for limiting this alarming new loose cannon of Leaderese with decent self-restraint.

The Earl of Derby, the foremost orator of the day, known as the Rupert of Debate, declared: "If, as in these days, the press aspires to exercise the influence of statesmen, the press should remember that they are not free from the corresponding responsibility of statesmen, and that it is incumbent on them, as a sacred duty, to maintain that type of moderation and respect even in expressing frankly their opinions on foreign affairs which would be required of every man who pretends to guide public opinion." Rupert SchmuPERT of Debate.

Public oratory and Leaderese have become less starched since then. Then *The Times* published a leaked ultimatum to the Tsar. Nothing much changes in the eternal struggle for the freedom of the press, and of the "ordinary" citizen to know what his Masters are up to. So Lord Derby returned to the attack: "How is it possible that any honourable man, editing a public paper of such circulation as *The Times*, can reconcile to his conscience the act of having made public that which he must have known was intended to be a public secret?" The Editor and his leader writer replied the next day. Their leader remains a ringing declaration of why the freedom of the press is the palladium of public liberty. It brings tears to the eyes of libertarians, and rage to the hearts of spin doctors and control freaks. "We hold ourselves to be responsible, not to Lord Derby or the House of Lords, but to the People of England for the accuracy and fitness of that which we think proper to publish. Whatever we conceive to be injurious to the public interests, it is our duty to withhold. But we ourselves are quite as good judges on that point as the Leader of the Opposition." And that is still the justification for leaks and leading articles in *The Times* and younger newspapers worthy of the name.

From then on the leading article became an established feature. Throughout the 19th century the shadowy (because anonymous) leader writers published and refined the new genre of Leaderese. They reflected and influenced the way that English changed. In the days when Palmerston in his "Civis Romanus Sum" speech on the Don Pacifico crisis (the classic example of gunboat diplomacy) addressed the House of Commons for five hours without drawing breath (except for effect, in order to introduce another quotation from Thucydides), leading articles reflected his classical style. Henry Reeve, Delane's chief leader writer, was nicknamed Il

Pomposo by his younger colleagues. And in an ungainly outburst of Victoriano Italiano, imitators disdained the Leaderese of *The Times* as “Printing House Square Ponderoso”. But as rhetoric became less classical and less constipated, so Leaderese became shorter and sharper for the new readers brought in by Reform, for which *The Times* led the campaign.

Lord Northcliffe, one of the great eccentric owners of *The Times*, and the only one so far to have been literally carted away foaming at the mouth by the men in white coats, had a notice hung above the News Room of *The Times*: REMEMBER: THEY ARE NINE. He was referring to the mental age of *Times* readers. This message infuriated the Black Friars (his name for his leader writers), who took themselves and their calling pretty damned seriously. But Northcliffe’s (exaggerated) slogan contains a germ of truth. Journalists should recognise that their readers will include those who know more about any subject than they do, and who are better equipped for abstract thought. But short, sharp and simple are virtues of Journalese. Elaboration, obscurity, and name-dropping are vices not confined to students. The register of Journalese is not a private language, except in the ferocious economy of the headline. A newspaper should be written in styles to suit every palate. But the leading articles, the heart of the paper, should be in the best and clearest of contemporary written English. The traditional coda of Times Leaderese during its brief period as organ of the Ruling Class, “On the one hand this, on the other hand that: only time will tell”, does not have the sharp edge of good Leaderese.

## Letters

The epistolary style of Letters to the Editor is a subset of Leaderese. The Letters Page is still the bulletin board for Everyman to address the nation. It is the only surviving medium for the formal letter, signed, “I have the Honour, Sir, to remain your Faithful Servant,” (the form of brown-nosing white lie known technically as a Phrop<sup>2</sup>). It is an edited version of the phone-in, keeping out the nutters. Its

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2. A nonsense word invented by Arnold Lunn for a competition in *The New Statesman*.

concision and sharp point make it the English equivalent of the epigram in the Ancient World. In 1914 Max Beerbohm recognised the emergence of the epistolary form of Journalese: “Could not this outrage be averted? There sprang from my lips that fiery formula which has sprung from the lips of so many choleric old gentlemen in the course of the last hundred years and more: ‘I shall write to *The Times*’.”

### **House styles of Journalese**

Reporters are still called correspondents, as in “From Our Own (From A Special) Correspondent”. That is precisely what the first reporters were. They wrote letters to the Proprietor/Editor, often anonymously, in order to avoid prosecution. And he published them, and sometimes went to prison for it. They were free copy. And because they tended to be written by the disaffected, they were often lively copy. But as *The Times* and other newspapers started to make pots of money from their mass circulations, they could afford to employ professional hacks. And these need a house style, to ensure that Colonel Gadaffi/Kadaffi/Q’udafi/ or whatever, is not spelled in different ways all over the paper.

Because it contains rules and conventions going back two centuries, the house style book of *The Times* is a historical repository of Journalese sense and nonsense. For example, until quite recently *The Times* persisted in spelling the Monna Lisa thus, with two “n”s. This was to suggest to the world that *The Times* was written by cultivated scholars and gentlemen, who knew that the Lady’s title came from the Italian Madonna. This was a work of supererogation. For one thing, the rest of the English-writing world persisted in spelling her Mona. And for another thing, the Italians call her La Gioconda. But in general, consistency in spelling and style are virtues of Journalese. Aberrations and solecisms serve only to annoy those nine-year-olds, the readers. The only good reason for not splitting an infinitive, when splitting conveys your meaning more precisely, is that out there in Tunbridge Wells and Tonypandy, there are mad pedants whose only memory of English grammar is the (imaginary and quite bogus) rule: Thou Shalt Never Split an Infinitive. Readers, even the mad pedants, pay the wages of journos. So it is folly to offend them without a good reason.

## **Journalese**

So newspapers should be written in clear, easy English that is a pleasure to read, in order to provide wretched commuters on the Northern Line with something to inform, improve, and educate them. The genre of Journalese is part of a Venn diagram which overlaps many other genres and styles. But most of Journalese should overlap the central core of the common English of its readers. When you start to examine Journalese as a distinct register of English, it ought to fade away like the Cheshire Cat, leaving only a smile behind.