

*The Newsmongers: A History of Tabloid Journalism*

Terry Kirby

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It took me longer to read this book than I expected – it is an engrossing read for anyone with an interest in modern news. Beginning with the Stone Age, chapter 1 provides a (very) potted history of news media up to the mid-nineteenth century which sets the scene for what follows. The next 150 years are covered in roughly 150 pages. Having outlined, for example, the rise of ‘yellow’ journalism, photojournalism, 1930s gift wars, the birth of *The Sun* and page 3, we reach 1981 on page 169. As the title suggests, this is a story of personalities – men like Alfred Harmsworth (founder of *The Mirror*), Lord Beaverbrook (who turned the *Mail* into the biggest-selling newspaper in Britain), and of course Robert Maxwell and Rupert Murdoch. Kirby clearly made a conscious effort to bring in women, including the columnist Dorothy Dix who became the 1920s’ highest-paid woman writer, and Rebekah Wade/Brooks, the first female editor of *The Sun*.

The last 45 years are explored in much greater depth: 200 pages themed around the decline of tabloid journalism. Here *Newsmongers* tells the stories behind headlines such as ‘GOTCHA’ and the notorious ‘The Truth’ that alienated a whole region and had a catastrophic effect on *The Sun*’s sales after Hillsborough. Rather than simply reiterating the details, Kirby explains why each was a significant milestone in journalism history. He also recounts occasions when tabloid campaigns led to positive change, such as the Macpherson Inquiry into the Stephen Lawrence case.

Kirby, however, is no apologist for the current state of tabloid journalism, frequently quoting those who have criticised its methods, regulation and political power. In fact, from chapter 9 to the book’s final pages, the ongoing phone hacking scandal that provoked criminal cases, civil lawsuits and the Leveson Inquiry dominates. While providing interesting vignettes that throw light on wider problems, here *Newsmongers* becomes slightly disjointed and repetitive. Indeed (and presumably in homage to a tabloid paper), each unrelated short ‘story’ in the final chapter is given its own headline. Nevertheless, Kirby’s book is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand where journalism is now, and how it got here.

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