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Psychology in the press 1988-1999

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In a centenary Media Watch special, Susan Howard and Martin Bauer examine why it is important for psychologists to consider the presence of psychology in the mass media. The content of popularised psychology may not always be what psychologists would wish, but does it reflect society's needs?

A Brief History

The Society celebrates its centenary in 2001, a fitting juncture at which to explore the relationship between psychology and the public. The history of this relationship is longer than a hundred years: at the beginning of the last century, psychology had already come a long way from its roots. In its 'long past' (Farr, 1996) psychology had been entwined with philosophy. Yet by the late 1800s, psychology had met a crossroads, one fork leading to the spiritual psyche, the other to scientific methods and aims of debunking (Burnham, 1987). Henceforth psychology was not only concerned with communicating the substance of research, but also with secularisation: severing 'spiritual' psychology from the canon of scientific activity.

The First World War boosted the popularity of psychology (Burnham, 1987); the public were turning to psychology as a substitute for superstitious dissections of the soul (Rapp, 1988), and from the 1920s, psychology has, with peaks and troughs, remained in the public sphere. It has been conceived of as science, but also as quackery, as an expression of common sense, and as the antipathy of common sense (Harré et al., 1985).

Psyche in the Media

The analysis of psychology in the mass media may tell us how the general public represent psychology; editors and journalists function as gatekeepers, selecting stories on behalf of their readers. It is reasonable to assume that they are not misjudging their audience, otherwise nobody would read their papers. Moreover, monitoring psychology in the media provides a gauge to measure the success of the Society's public relations, and a lens through which to examine the concerns of society in its wider sense.

Since the 1980s, the Society has been collecting articles from the British press based on the presence of the word 'psychologist', or reference to 'The British Psychological Society' and its journal titles. These articles are made available to the Science Media Monitor at the Science Museum in London. We have developed a database of selected national newspapers (Telegraph, Guardian, Mail and Mirror) and lifestyle magazines (e.g. Cosmopolitan and Esquire), and report here on the intensity and slant of coverage from 1988 to 1999.

Figure 1: Intensity of coverage in broadsheet and tabloid press: 1988 to 1999

Figure 2: Publications covering psychology

Figure 1 on the intensity of copy in broadsheet and tabloid newspapers, depicts the increase in coverage of psychology from 1988 to 1999. The interest of the national press in psychology is growing. By 1999, we could expect 3-4 articles referring to psychology per week in any of the newspapers, compared to one or less every week back in 1988: a fourfold increase. A

comparison with general science coverage shows that the increase in media attention to psychology is far greater than the increase in attention to science overall, which roughly doubled during the 1990s (Bauer, 1998 and 2000).

An infatuation seems to have developed between psychology and the print media, possibly propelled by the activities of the Society press office after the appointment of a full-time press officer in 1989, possibly as part of the zeitgeist. Should psychologists rejoice? Perhaps not yet, as the notion that 'the only thing worse than bad publicity is no publicity' sits badly with academic or professional ethos. We should not leave the topics that invite references to psychology unexamined.

What is said of psychology and how

In a content analysis of a representative random sample from our database, we categorised the 'tone' articles as either 'serious' or 'humorous', where 'serious' meant that the tone of the article was either literal or solemn and 'humorous' meant that the article was judged as ironic or jocular. Intra-coder reliability on a sub-sample of articles, over an interval of six weeks, was 90% (percentage of agreement).

References to psychology in the daily press are traditionally ironic; for some writers, Annual Conferences of the Society have served as a source of jokes. For example, a news snippet entitled "Automatic pilot" (The Guardian, Health, 25 May 1999) is dubious about psychological expertise. Referring to a symposium, the article comments:

"Since the majority of pilot errors are ones of decision-making, the shrinks recommended that the onboard computers should be designed to accommodate human error. Well, that's that problem sorted."

Figure 3: Serious Coverage in Tabloids and Broadsheets

Yet Figure 3 shows how the proportion of serious coverage has inflated over the years. While broadsheets generally treat psychology more soberly than the tabloid press, the gap is closing. By 1999, about 85 per cent of the total coverage is judged as serious. That psychologists and their work are taken seriously seems like good news, but further analysis reveals a more complex picture.

Using rhetorical analysis, we looked in more depth at a corpus of articles from May 1999, a month of intense coverage. A rhetorical analysis reveals the language, images and arguments used in relation to psychology and psychologists (Leach, 2000). In our corpus, we identified four genres of psychological reportage: *The cost of material gain*, *Violence and a discourse of blame* and two elaborated below: *Science or Superstition?* and *Gossip and navel-gazing*. Some of the articles could feasibly be included in more than one genre, but the genres provide a broad frame for the description of themes that arise in the popularisation of psychology.

Science or superstition

Psychology is rhetorically portrayed as scientific in 'God's in your cranial lobes' (Raj Persaud, Financial Times, 8 May 1999). A cartoon shows a man in a white coat, wearing a cranial helmet out of which protrude religious symbols; a giant hand (God?) adjusts the helmet. The sub-heading describes how the article aims to detect 'whether part of the brain is designated for

divine experiences'. Medical and literary allusions are sophisticated (the posterior superior parietal lobule and Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*), and five references to research programmes and findings are provided, conveying the reliability of the author's deliberations.

It is worth mentioning here that while Persaud practices primarily as a psychiatrist, he has a degree in psychology and is famously associated with it. In this context, those concerned with public relations should be pleased with the association and what it tells us about the popularisation of psychology. In this article, as in several others in the corpus, psychological ideas have been included into the trusted ranks of *science*.

However, another view of psychology is in sharp contrast to that of 'scientific psychology'. It is possible that the increase in coverage of psychology may be due to its hanging on to the coat-tails of new age activity and theology. Graumann (1996) discussed how psychology lost its 'soul' in exchange for the trappings of science, but in fact it is sometimes difficult to tell whether popular newspapers regard psychology as a branch of science or as a mystical contribution to social existence. Moscovici (1988) wrote of how psychologists miss the spiritual and 'very ancient beliefs' which dwell 'in a zone of darkness shrouding most of [men's] thoughts and relationships' (p.244). But psychology in the popular press draws on both worlds: the 'respectable' *and* the mystical.

In the Daily Mail's 'Dream Doctor' column every Saturday, readers send in a description of a dream for analysis by psychologist Sarah Dening. There are no marks of 'ethos' affiliating her with a professional body or institution and the structure of the column reads more like a tarot reading than a clinical consultation. From their shared cultural memory, journalist and reader understand the magical qualities associated with dreams and the interpretation of their symbolism. The delivery of the column is intimate – Dening addresses very personal issues that she understands to be at the root of the dream. Also a stylistic clue informs the reader that psychology is related to the supernatural: the column is at the centre of Jonathan Cainer's weekly astrological horoscopes!

So it is clear that the popular press taps into the psychology of illusion, dream and the personal and private, as well as the crisper, clearer vision of science. In 1969, Gustav Jahoda hoped that psychology could facilitate education and eliminate superstition. However, it seems that instead of undermining superstition, psychology has been partially admitted to the territory of the supernatural, a shift in meaning that is common in the popularisation of science (Lessl, 1985).

Gossip

Gossip takes two forms in the popular press: public and private lives. For the sake of brevity, we shall discuss only the former. The gossip surrounding celebrities, their actions, appearances and our obsession with them make up a large proportion of the corpus.

Epideictic arguments are described in the canon of rhetoric as those which attribute praise and blame. Celebrities are apparently regarded a proper targets for this evaluation. Roland White's "Too much Ginger whine" (The Times, 9 May 1999, Culture, p30) describes Geri 'Ginger Spice' Halliwell as self-obsessed. Interestingly, White suggests that "psychologist Oliver James" should interview Geri about her father, although in light of the article written by James in The Express (see below), this seems inadvisable.

Bouhoutsos et al (1986) decry the exploitation of human misery for entertainment and perhaps caution is prudent; often, arguments send mixed messages to those whom they attempt to support. In “Take a look at the real Geri...” (Daily Express, 5 May 1999, p18) the **psychiatrist Oliver James** confirms his view that women are more depressed, even those women who ‘have it all’. Having discussed Geri Halliwell’s fragility at length, James concludes that she has “sold her soul” doubly – through her involvement with the Spice Girls and the making of the autobiographical documentary. He expresses pity for her, but also writes: “Television is a medium which often makes mediocre people seem talented. It can also make average people look more beautiful than they really are”. Ouch!

The mixed message and the epideictic argument are also employed to delve into weight problems of the stars. In “Hungry for Hollywood” (Cosmopolitan, May 1999), Anita Chaudhuri describes actress Calista Flockhart’s shoulder blades as “knives” and other actresses are described as having “stick-like arms and bony...legs”. Ironically, clinical psychologist Deanne Jade is quoted as saying that she has seen “actresses destroyed by vindictive comments about their weight”; psychologists’ quotes are segued into articles that are gossipy, even bitchy.

The genres identified in the rhetorical analysis were integrated into a systematic content analysis of the representative sample from our database. We classified articles into six thematic categories, with articles not fitting into these categories classified as OTHER. Considering the error variance in our estimates (+/- 3.8 per cent for proportions of 20 per cent), there is little difference between the themes, each attracting between 10 and 20 per cent of the copy.

Comparing across time and papers, we find four thematic clusters. A consistently large amount of copy emerges from summing the themes FAME (celebrities), PEOPLE (interpersonal relations) and SELF (personality analysis). This cluster, mirroring in content the rhetorical genre of *Gossip*, peaks with 71 per cent in 1998’s tabloid coverage, featuring less in the broadsheet press, but rising with time. The two types of newspaper tend to converge towards the preferred tabloid topics as the century comes to a close. This leaves us with a double convergence: over time, tabloids become more serious in tone (as shown above) and broadsheets increasingly report on topics traditionally associated with populism. In other words, we find more gossip, presented more seriously.

MIND (intelligence, learning and education), CRIME (crime and violence) and WORK (careers and jobs) are independent. There seems to be a standard level of CRIME copy of 5-10 per cent, except in 1993. Subjects related to WORK are receiving more copy in both types of outlets. Topics related to MIND are declining in the tabloids, increasing in the broadsheets. Most OTHER themes occur in the broadsheet press, reflecting a wider horizon of topics.

Our assumption of a confined number of themes seems to match the data. Over the last 12 years we identify some trends. However, ‘earthquake’ events may lead to fluctuations. The Bulger murder accounts for heightened interest in ‘Crime’ in 1993. The papers were preoccupied with reasons for and consequences of the murder. Psychologists were consulted to respond to a seemingly heartfelt national sense of crisis. To be a figure of trust in this circumstance is a mark of growing faith in psychology, conferring both kudos and responsibility. Overall, however, we note a sense of fin de siècle hedonism emerging as a general theme: the popular press recruit psychology into the drive for gossip, both personal and public, providing further avenues of escapism.

A Dilemma

The increase in media interest in psychology suggests that faith in psychologists is increasing and/or that the Public Relations of the Society are bearing fruit. In response to national crises such as the Bulger murder of 1993, psychologists are asked to provide comfort, understanding and hope for prevention of such crises in the future. In this context psychology is clearly regarded an authority. However, trust is not necessarily granted because of psychology's scientific status, but possibly because in the public mind, psychology is affiliated to the religious desire for an explanation of 'evil'. And although psychologists are consulted about harrowing events, the reverse characteristic of psychology in the national press in the 1990s is that it contributes to frivolity, gossip and what one might describe as a prurient desire for insight into the lives of celebrities.

Psychology has been granted greater attention in British public life over recent years, an increase that by far exceeds the general increase in matters scientific in the media during the 1990s. However, despite 100 years of purposeful debunking, popular psychology is still fulfilling the public need for spiritual guidance and diversionary gossip. What remains is an uncomfortable dilemma for psychology and its professional representatives: is increased public attention a fair exchange for assuming the twin mantles of priestliness and prurience?

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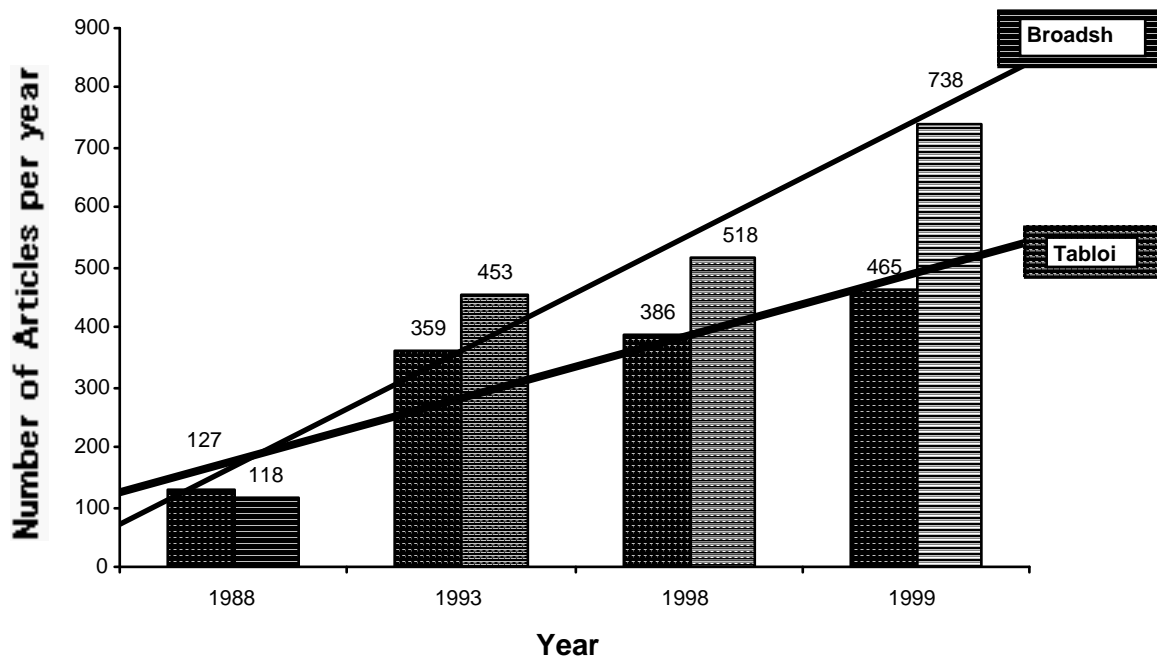
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Graphs from Population:

Figure 1: Intensity of Coverage



Graph from Sample:

Figure 3: Seriousness of Tabloids' and Broadsheets' Coverage [C7]

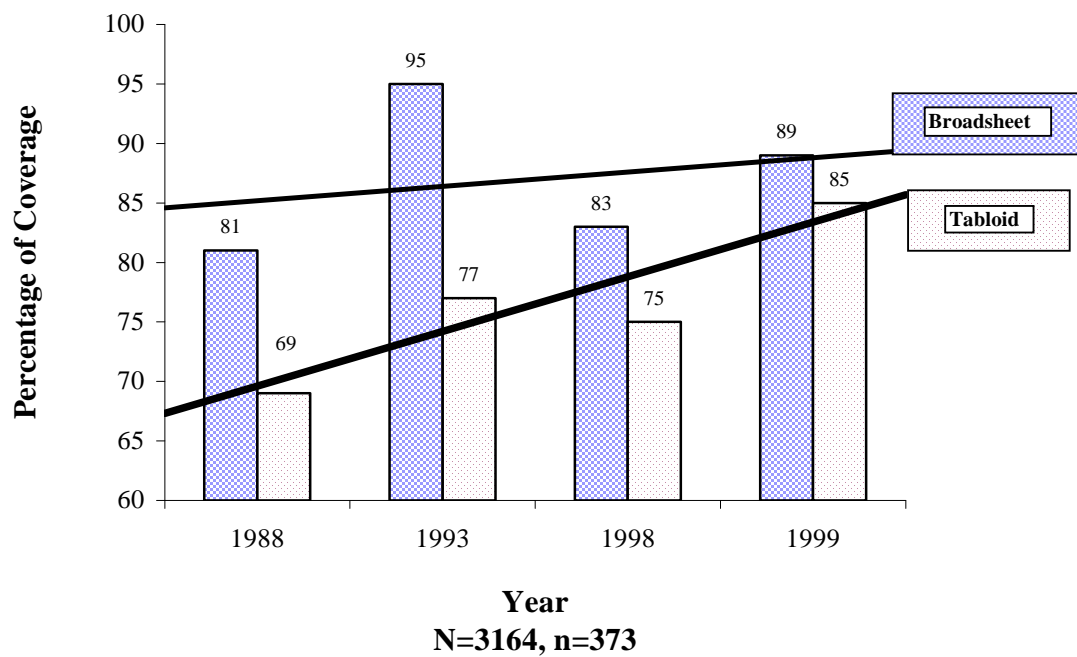


Figure 2: Publications Covering Psychology

