Review:
Dallas Liddle,
News Machines: The Systems of Daily Journalism in Britain, 1785–1885
(Oxford: OUP, 2026)

Drawing on major research articles published in the interim in *Book History* and the *Journal of Victorian Culture* as well as of course *Victorian Periodicals Review* itself, Dallas Liddle's new study of "The Systems of Daily Journalism in Britain, 1785-1885" proves even more original than his *Dynamics* of *Genre* issued back in 2009, with its own challenging claims concerning the dominant "influence of the genre forms used by mid-Victorian journalists on the practices of contemporary writers" of literary work (Introduction, 1). As encapsulated in the Abstract, the insistent argument of *News Machines* is that the "primary drivers" of the development of the metropolitan morning daily newspaper over the long nineteenth century were neither "the decisions of editors and owners" nor "the larger social forces at work in that era" but rather "the complex technical and organizational mechanisms" whose mediating power was largely autonomous.

The theoretical underpinnings of the argument derive explicitly from the field of systems engineering emerging from the 1950s, introduced in a Preface proposing that the analysis of systems dynamics represents "the best way to understand how Victorian newspapers really worked" (p. 186). These principles are then applied in an introductory chapter explaining generally how the expansion of the British press through the nineteenth century was shaped by interactions among the various sub-systems that form in turn the subjects of subsequent chapters: printing systems, information systems, and management systems. Yet Liddle is at pains to emphasize in his Introduction that, since his primary aim is "not to advance systems theory but to illuminate the historical practices of nineteenth-century daily news, facts will always come first in this book, and systems theories are introduced only as needed." (p. 27). Indeed, Liddle's historiography relies on a well-judged balance between qualitative study of a remarkably wide range of nineteenth-century writings on the press, the large majority drawn from serial publications, and quantitative analysis of data derived from both published runs of particular dailies and the manuscript business records of particular organizations. As the starting date for his century of growth might suggest, Liddle's volume gives a good deal more attention to the early decades of the nineteenth century than Victorianists are generally accustomed to, while the key case examined is that of *The Times* of London. Thus the principal primary sources are: the Times Digital Archive from Gale Cengage (a pioneer in the field, and perhaps consequently with a slightly low OCR success rate and rather too many missing issues or pages); and the *Times* Media Ltd records now held down on the Thames estuary at Rainham, Essex (in particular the

extensive correspondence and the Editorial Diaries compiled from 1857 onwards). The results are often compelling, and I am certain that, in particular, the revisionist account of developments in nineteenth-century printing technology and practice offered in Chapter 2: "Printing: Inventing Systems" will soon become required reading on most courses in the history of journalism or the press.

But even the most informative books tend to contain errors both of commission and omission, and *News Machines* is by no means an exception. A couple of striking instances. In Chapter 1: "The Rise of the Machines" (p. 13*n*28), to illuminate the extremely tight deadlines that governed reporting of late-night sittings at Westminster, Liddle cites the infamous "Harcourt interpolation" (when a disgruntled *Times* compositor inserted a line of obscenity into the transcription of a speech by the Home Secretary) as "[t]he parliamentary report in the *Times* for January 13, 1882." However, the speech in question was in fact delivered during the parliamentary recess, at Burton-on-Trent, Staffordshire, on a Saturday evening, and thus reported in the newspaper on the following Monday, January 23, 1882 ("Parliament Out of Session: The Home Secretary and the Attorney-General at Burton", p. 7d). Or again, in Chapter 3. "Reporting and Editorial Writing: Information Systems" (p. 133), Liddle inserts Figure 3.4 "Leading articles published per year in the *Times*, 1857–71" to demonstrate graphically the shift during that period from just over three to around four leaders per day. But, without explanation and although the data itself is readily available, five of the fifteen yearly data points are omitted from the graph, including consecutive ones from 1858-1860, so that the trend during the early part of the period at least remains invisible. A more general issue concerns the decision to exclude items published in nineteenth-century newspapers from the Bibliography, and not to indicate page and column numbers, among other available bibliographic information, if and when such material is cited in the chapter footnotes. As a result, the reader has to put in a good deal of detective work to uncover error: a good example occurs in the second chapter (pp. 72-73), when Liddle cites, without offering further bibliographic detail, "an 1814 letter to the *Times*" from the German Friedrich Koenig, unjustly known (in this revisionary account) for the "invention" of the steam-powered press. Yet persistent investigation reveals that the text in question, while signed "FR. KOENIG.", in fact took the discursive form of an announcement of over a thousand words entitled "To the Public" (8 December 1814, p. 2c-d). (Searching here is pretty haphazard on the Times Digital Archive, which treats the item as an "article" and offers an OCR Confidence rate of only about 50%--that is, every second character may be inaccurate.)

With respect to the overarching argument contesting the determining influence of either "decisions of editors and owners" or "larger social forces" alleged by generations of earlier scholars, I would argue that a much more convincing case is made against the former than the latter. Indeed Liddle himself seems occasionally to rely on general socio-economic explanations

for specific systemic variations or changes; for example, in Chapter 4. “Management Systems: Editors and Architectures” there is a detailed discussion of how the choice between vertical/coordinated and horizontal/decentralized organization was often linked to commercial competition and survival. I would thus have welcomed a fifth chapter dedicated to the dynamic micro-economic systems of press enterprises in relation to macro-economic developments over the long nineteenth century in what Benedict Anderson taught us to call “print capitalism”; or at least an additional section in Chapter Three devoted to a further information category, that is, classified advertising, which throughout the period in question regularly occupied a far larger proportion of the space available in metropolitan dailies than parliamentary reports and leading articles put together.

But enough carping already; the fascinating yet controversial propositions of *News Machines* will surely be evaluated variously and debated vigorously by students of Victorian periodicals for many a long day.

Graham Law
Waseda University, Tokyo
October 2026