

Deaf newspapers: a cornerstone of the deaf community

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Introduction

The existence of a group of people who identify themselves as members of a distinct community based primarily on their shared deafness is now widely accepted. The members of this community are geographically dispersed, with there being no places in Britain where the majority of inhabitants are deaf. However, a locus for the community's activities was provided by the network of deaf clubs that were established from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. In these clubs, deaf people were able to develop notions of identity based on mutual deafness and a communal form of social, cultural and linguistic expression. The cultural expression of this identity then served to strengthen and maintain the sense of community. These clubs would have remained to some extent isolated, self-contained communities without some means of maintaining contact and sharing information with each other. The main form for this communication was provided by a series of publications aimed at deaf people, the most recent of which was *British Deaf News (BDN)*. These newspapers and magazines allowed deaf people to keep abreast of events outside their own club and helped to maintain contact across the British deaf community. The titles included news on all aspects of deaf people's lives, and large sections of each issue were devoted to passing on information relating to the social activities of the various deaf clubs and their members from across the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. In doing so, these newspapers played a central role in the maintenance and development of the deaf community, and the sharing and expression of its culture, values and aspirations.

The role of newspapers in the formation and maintenance of community identity

Newspapers are becoming an increasingly important source of data and information for cultural historians across a range of disciplines and interests, with stories, letters and editorials used to reconstruct history from the perspectives of both readers and publishers. As Tunstall states, 'The press reflects British history, and caricatures social divisions' and as such provide insights into a range of popular views and opinions. Some examples of the way in which newspapers

have informed a variety of research topics include their value in tracing family histories, displaying attitudes to disadvantaged community groups, recording the impact of sporting events on sections of society, and in providing insights into the views and opinions expressed by letter writers to newspapers from earlier periods. Another reason why printed materials such as newspapers are becoming increasingly important for academic research is that 'they are an important creator and transmitter of cultural values and ideas, and socio-political ideologies'. Anderson highlights the importance of newspapers as a means of binding members of a community together, stating that each newspaper shares a connection with all other readers of the same paper who could not otherwise come together in the same place at the same time. The development of 'print capitalism' is, he argues, an essential stage in the process of community consolidation. Reading the same newspapers allows the large-scale transmission of these 'cultural values and ideas' and thus plays a part in developing the idea of belonging to a wider community described by Anderson as 'nationhood'. Newspapers are important in this process as they help in shaping and informing opinions and creating feelings of shared identity amongst readers. However, the transmission of identity as performed by newspapers is not a one-way process. The way in which stories are reported can also be influenced by issues of identity which arise from the target readerships. As well as creating and transmitting culturally defining information, newspapers also record events and opinions that are derived from their readerships. On a number of geographical levels, whether local, regional or national, newspapers have to share an identity with their readers, by broadly reflecting the views and opinions of their target readership. An analysis of newspaper content can therefore provide important insights into not only the lives of their readers, but also into what readers of particular titles believe in and aspire to. Newspapers can also act as an important supplement to official records, by providing examples and specific information that may not be included in the formal accounts kept by authorities or organisations. Official records are often statistically based, with totals, trends and aggregates being the main focus of what is recorded. In situations where specific examples of the events being recorded are needed, newspapers can provide information and thus illustrate the bare statistics of official accounts. Local newspapers tend to focus more on community issues and 'human interest' stories, whilst national stories are often reported in terms of local impact. National publications aimed at particular community groups operate in a similar way; although they may have a wider geographical focus, they share many of the characteristics of a local newspaper in the way stories are chosen and addressed. In such titles,

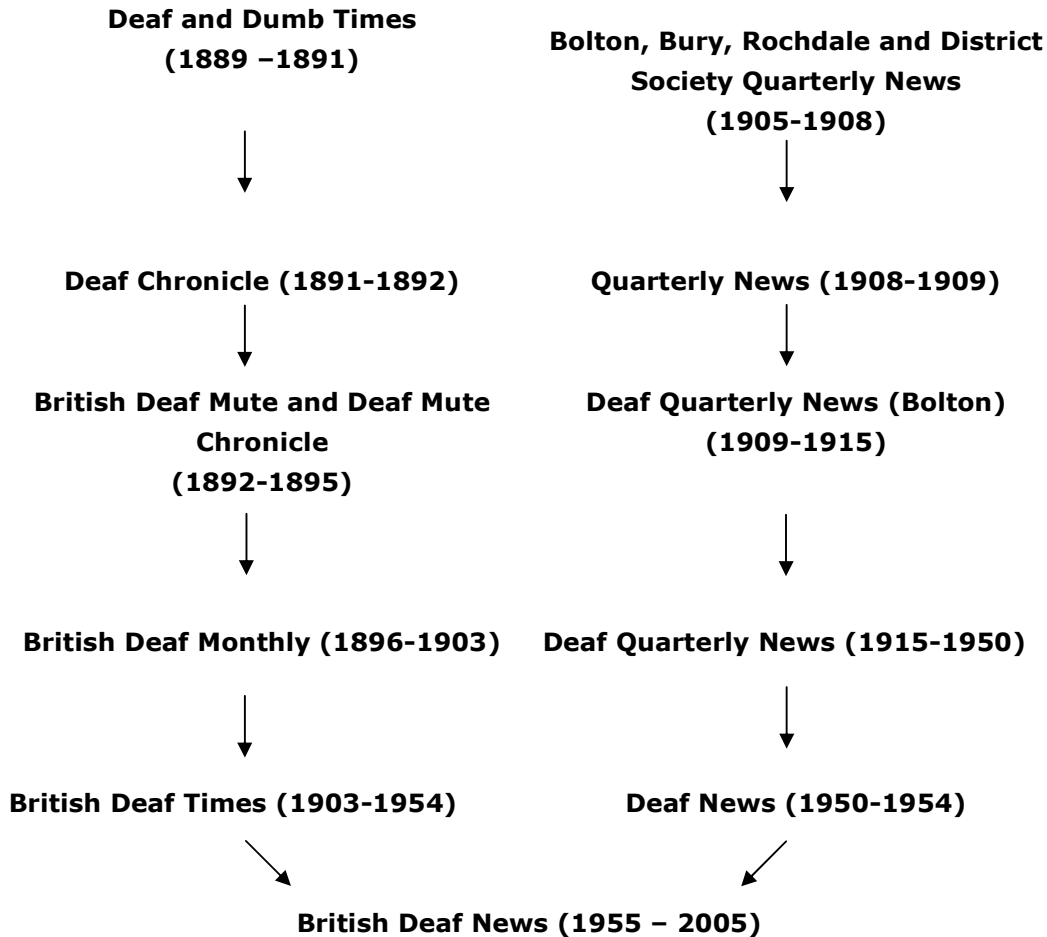
community membership is expressed through factors other than shared geographical location. In both types of paper, the readership acts as both the focus of the publication (by having community views and perspectives reported and reflected) and as the source of its content (by providing the topics and stories covered). In doing so, these publications inform and influence community members and help them, as readers of the same newspaper, to share feelings of community with all other readers of the same paper. Using the example of the *London Evening Standard*, Glover shows that a local newspaper may be defined on more than merely geographical considerations; 'local' can instead be linked to shared interests amongst the paper's readers. 'The Evening Standard has gone for the community of interest, rather than the geographical community. It looks at the world through the eyes of the London commuter'. Replace 'The Evening Standard' with 'British Deaf News' and 'London commuters' with 'the deaf community' and this is precisely the role that *BDN* filled within the British deaf community throughout the period of this research.

Deaf newspapers have provided an intimate but largely ignored record of the lives and experiences of British deaf people since at least the middle of the nineteenth century. As such, deaf print media is virtually without parallel in offering insights into the views and opinions of the British deaf community and in reporting both changes and consistency in the way notions of a communal deaf experience has emerged and developed over the past 150 years. During the second half of the twentieth century, the main newspaper for deaf people was the British Deaf News (*BDN*). Founded in 1955, the title was the culmination of a long succession of newspapers produced for a deaf readership, as well as for those working with and for deaf people. However, papers such as *Deaf Mute*, *Deaf Quarterly News*, *British Deaf Times* and the hugely important *British Deaf News* have played a much more pivotal role within the deaf community than merely recording its events and happenings. Deaf newspapers have played a pivotal role in the maintenance of the deaf community itself, by providing a conduit through which the geographical dispersed members of the community were able to keep in touch each other and to share in the experiences and perspectives of their contemporaries from across Britain. In doing so, papers such as *BDN* helped to disseminate information and ideas to a group of people who had no access to other forms of mass communication. At the same time, deaf newspapers helped foster feelings of community cohesion and membership amongst deaf people who might not otherwise have any direct contact with people from similar backgrounds who lived outside their immediate location. In doing so, deaf print media served as one part

of the deaf community's 'cultural product', placing deaf newspapers at the very heart of the process by which the concept of the 'Deaf Nation' has emerged in recent years.

A brief history of British Deaf News

Peter Jackson has compiled the following genealogy for British Deaf News:



These titles themselves followed on from earlier, short-lived publications which served more localised readerships in Scotland and various parts of England. These were often set up as fundraising ventures for schools and deaf welfare bodies, as well as hopefully providing deaf schoolboys with a trade they could pursue in adult life. Throughout its history, BDN and its predecessors did not employ journalists, but instead relied on a small editorial staff seeking out deafness related stories from the mainstream press. More importantly in terms of deaf newspapers serving as what Anderson terms 'cultural product', the newspaper had the majority of its content provided by unpaid contributors. In many ways, it was the way in which BDN and British Deaf Times in particular

gathered their content that established these publications as central and vital elements in the maintenance and development of the British deaf community. So how exactly did BDN serve as 'a cornerstone of the deaf community?'

Content

Many of the early deaf publications such as *Ephphatha* (published by The Association in Aid of the Deaf and Dumb) had a strong religious focus, reflecting the background of the editors and the attitudes towards deafness of the religious orders who ran the organisations represented by the papers. The editors promoted the message of God and the need for deaf people to seek salvation through religious observance. In doing so these publications helped to sustain the historical religious perception of deafness as being a visitation from God. There were extracts from the Bible (especially those which mentioned or could be related to deafness), profiles of leading Churchmen and 'friends of the deaf' and stories about deaf successes. Depending on the publication, there would also be stories about ordinary deaf people achieving some sort of success or overcoming tribulation, often in unusual circumstances. The Church based publications strongly emphasised the medical and religious models of deafness, and were aimed at both hearing and deaf readerships. These publications took a very paternalistic approach to caring for deaf people, seeing and promoting it as a noble and Christian endeavour. One of the main aims of deaf papers was to help its readers to improve their lot, on earth as well as in heaven.

During the middle period of the 20th century, deaf newspapers developed into a format that was to remain largely unchanged until the very end of the century. In particular, *BDT* and later *BDN* had a set format that often makes it hard to be certain which year a specific issue may come from without looking at the date on the cover. There was news of deaf events and people in the hearing world, news of new technology and legislation relating to deaf people, a strong bias towards the activities of the British Deaf Association, news of deaf people from around the world ('*Girdle around the World*'), and the two central pillars of *BDN* for the first forty years of its existence, deaf sport and news from the deaf clubs. In virtually every aspect of its content and focus, *BDN* (despite being a national publication) served as the local newspaper of the deaf community and helped to foster ideas and shared community, culture and perspectives that were not otherwise available to deaf people outside their own locality. In essence, *BDN* provided the focal point for a number of isolated and disparate local communities to join together as a collective whole. Anderson defines the nation as 'an imagined

political community' which emerges from a number of smaller social groups or 'villages'. Through their place at the forefront of the deaf community's political campaigning, deaf clubs might be seen as the 'villages' from which the 'imagined political community' that is at the heart of the Deaf Nation principle emerged. However, without some means of connecting these 'villages' to each other on a regular basis, the 'imagined political community' which is the basis of the modern deaf community could not have emerged. This connection was provided by BDN, which provided its readers with ample evidence that a community of deaf people existed. Moreover, this community was based on shared deafness and the effects of this deafness on its members' experiences, outlooks and aspirations.

The '*Around the clubs*' feature listed the activities of the numerous Deaf Clubs and their members, and as such provides a useful insight into deaf life, its patterns and changes, and the wide range of social and leisure activities deaf people have engaged in. The club news pages varied little from 1955 until they were dropped following the change of publisher in 1999. The main function of these pages was to act as the garden fence, post office queue or water cooler of the deaf community, in passing on the type of apparently inconsequential news (effectively gossip) that is one of the bedrocks of all community life. The news items reported were those that the writers felt were important news to pass on to others of a similar background, and demonstrated what they themselves wanted to know from other parts of the country. So sport and outings feature strongly, as do examples of interaction –and especially success – in and with the hearing world. Right up until the late 1980s, news of religious based activities remained a regular and important element of the news passed on through these pages. Births, engagements, marriages are all also regular and consistent items, as are some quite personal matters such as injury, accident, illness and death. Interestingly, no examples were found of apologies being made for passing on personal news or any letters of objection in the letters pages of *BDN* from 1955 onwards. Presumably those mentioned in these type of stories did not mind being identified in the way they were, again emphasising the community aspects of the newspaper's content.

From 1980 onwards, BDN became less conservative in its approach to deaf issues and was much more active in the burgeoning deaf rights movement. This was in line with the views not only of its readers, but also

of the main organisation for profoundly deaf people, the BDA. BDN had always been the *de facto* newsletter of the BDA, and so as that organisation became more politicised and more confident in forcibly expressing the views of deaf people concerning their basic human rights, so BDN was a powerful tool in disseminating this message and gaining support for the BDA's activities. Given the geographic dispersion of deaf people, and the lack of other forms of mass communication, BDN was vital to the ultimate success of many of the BDA's campaigns relating to disability legislation and provision of services to deaf people.

Conclusion

In addition, I would argue strongly that without BDN providing the deaf community with the means to establish a strong sense of self- and community identity and awareness, the deaf community as we know it today would not and could not have come into existence. BDN and its predecessor BDT served as the forum for the dissemination of ideas and political activism, especially so during the 1970s and 80s, when deaf activists such as Paddy Ladd, Raymond Lee, Maggie Woolley and others began to question the commonly held perception of deaf people as being disabled. Without some means of letting deaf people around Britain keep abreast of each others activities and without the ability to reach significant numbers of deaf people who were otherwise largely isolated from each other beyond the network of local deaf clubs, then not only would a shared political agenda have proved impossible to establish, but more critically, the notion of a deaf community, which demonstrates many of Anderson's criteria for being seen as an 'imagined community', would have had no way of taking hold within the minds of ordinary deaf people.