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Readers’ letters to Victorian local newspapers as journalistic genre

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Letters to the editor in English local newspapers in the second half of the nineteenth century were a journalistic genre, although presented as if written by non-journalists. They were journalistic in that they were selected, edited and occasionally written by journalists. This high degree of mediation limits their use in assessing public opinion, although quantitative analysis reveals suggestive patterns, and analysing them in aggregate offers more reliable conclusions than placing too much weight on any individual letter. These letters were mainly on local matters, overwhelmingly negative, and usually ‘talked past each other’ (Wahl-Jorgensen 2007, 198), although there was some genuine debate. In the sample of letters analysed here, most were written pseudonymously at mid-century, but this changed rapidly so that by the end of the nineteenth century, most were signed. While pseudonyms cause problems for historians, they had two advantages for the writers: an added rhetorical resource, and the freedom of anonymity, especially for women and working-class letter-writers. The public sphere probably became more bourgeois, despite growing working-class readership. However, there is no sign that the public sphere was in decline, rather it was splintering.

This is the first systematic study of readers’ letters in the mainstream Victorian press (i.e. newspapers produced outside London). Local weekly newspapers have been chosen because they were the most popular mass media product of the second half of the nineteenth century (more popular than London newspapers and magazines, more numerous than books); thousands of individual titles across Britain and Ireland came and went, and all offered space for letters to the editor, every week – an enormous platform, when viewed nationally (Hobbs 2018, 4–6; Eliot 1994, 83; North 2003). The period, too, has wider significance – production routines and reading habits were rapidly being formed in these decades, many of them lasting into the twenty-first century. The smaller circulation of each local title, in comparison with the handful of London titles with larger circulations, meant that it was easier for readers to have their letters accepted. This lower level of mediation, and the

genuinely national spread of the local press, make letters in local papers more valuable as historical evidence. This study uses content analysis and close reading of letters in newspapers in Preston, Lancashire, combined with evidence from the trade press, memoirs, company histories of newspapers, and private correspondence.

Most of this chapter's themes can be found in an 1871 article in the newspaper trade magazine, *Press News.* The anonymous writer explains how readers' letters were central to the revitalisation of an unnamed small-town paper:

> As a sort of sky-rocket we let off a sharp letter on the bad playing of the parish organist, and the noise of the charity children in the gallery of the parish church, by a parishioner of thirty years' standing. This was followed up by firebrand number two, in the shape of an angry remonstrance from a railway passenger as to the want of punctuality in the trains, and the absence of fires in the waiting room… the contents of this first number got talked about by everybody from one end of the parish to the other – so much so, that nearly everyone of the inhabitants rushed to the printing-office to get a copy for themselves ... better still if you can get a few of the leading people to write and cut you up for your presumption, for rest assured they will buy to see if their letter is in, and when they are once satisfied on that point, they will buy more copies to give away … Then there is the universal advertising – all cheap too – which is promoted by the conversation on the correspondence of your last number. The curate goes to the barber's … he is there asked what he thinks of the letter … on the church organ and the charity children. He is astonished at the audacity, buys a copy, and takes it at once to the vicar, who directly orders two more for the bishop, and one for his own solicitor … The curate is ordered to reply to the vile calumny, but not being equal to the task, he takes it to the schoolmaster, who concocts a letter to order, and signs it "A Seat-holder." (*London, Provincial, and Colonial Press News,* 1871, 10)

The first two letters were written by a journalist, at the extreme end of a spectrum of mediation of letters, with, at the other end, letters written by readers with no connection to the newspaper, published with little or no editing; a more typical level of mediation would have been applied to the third letter, from the schoolmaster, involving selection and editing. The editor used the popularity of letters, especially controversial ones, to encourage further letters and to increase readership (what we would call 'sockpuppeting' nowadays). All three letters are pseudonymous, and all three pretend to be from someone other than the actual writer. The importance of letters from high-status readers ('influencers', we might call them today) is acknowledged, as is the level of cultural capital required to successfully write a letter for publication, leading the well-educated curate to ask the schoolmaster to do this task for him. The first two letters are complaints - the default setting for newspaper

correspondence –and all are probably written by middle-class men. Finally, the letters ‘got talked about’: they had created a circuit of oral and print debate, a local public sphere.

Readers’ letters as highly mediated journalistic genre

The accuracy of the *Press News* anecdote is confirmed by Victorian journalists’ memoirs. William Hunt, editor of the Hull daily, the *Eastern Morning News* (1864-1929), admitted that 'some of the early discussions in the correspondence columns of the paper owed a good deal to the energy and ability of members of our own staff' (Hunt 1887, 94). When J.W. Robertson Scott joined the *Birmingham Gazette* as an editorial assistant in the late 1880s, he was asked to write ‘one or two short “Letters to the Editor”’; Scott saw this as a sign of his editor’s ‘sound journalistic appreciation of the value of correspondence’ (Scott 1951, 256–57). In Devon another editor, Robert Were, who founded the *Tiverton Gazette* (1858-), 'was considerably helped by a somewhat animated correspondence between the Vicar of St Paul's Church and the Priest of the Chapel of St John' (A. T. Gregory 1932, 40).

Readers’ letters, then, are one among many journalistic genres. ‘What appears to be the least mediated, the most open and democratic element of a newspaper is, in fact, as mediated, closed and anti-democratic as other aspects in journalism' (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1989, 338, cited in Silva 2012, 253). Gregory and Hutchins (2004, 187–88) go further, arguing that 'the letters to the editor page is not an open channel of communication between individuals in a public space of rational, two-way debate, but a complex social space mediated by the routine practices of editorial staff.' Lobato, Thomas, and Hunter (2011, 902) include readers’ letters in a discussion of ‘user-generated content’ (UGC), placing letters at the most formal, mediated end of the spectrum, the opposite of family photographs and fanzines. They see UGC as a ‘boundary object’ (citing Strathern 2003, 45) straddling the border between formal and informal media sectors, ‘exposing points of tension, sparking frontier conflicts, and becoming, in some cases, sites for accommodation and negotiation' (Lobato, Thomas, and Hunter 2011, 909). This is a helpful way of understanding how the first newspapers consisted entirely of letters (Sommerville 1996, 6), but over the centuries letters became a boundary object, sitting on the border between material produced by professional journalists and that produced by their ‘other’ (Wahl-Jorgensen 2007, 5), the public.

Beyond the continuum of informal/formal media systems, letters to the editor are part of other continua: the proportion of UGC to be found in a particular publication, with those publishing no correspondence at one end, such as the *London Journal, Household Words,*

Punch, the *Illustrated London News* and *Blackwood's Magazine*, and publications like *Notes and Queries* or the *English Mechanic* at the other, consisting almost entirely of readers' contributions (Mussell 2007, 29). There was also variation between publications in the degree of selection and editing of letters, and perhaps variation between issues, depending on staff time available. Raeymaeckers (2016, 218) found that 21st-century Flemish popular newspapers worked hard to make 'badly written letters readable … to give a voice to ordinary citizens'. This may well have been true in the 19th century, but I have found no evidence of it. Such editing was time-consuming, according to Frederic Carrington, editor of the *Gloucestershire Chronicle,* describing the duties of a local editor: 'there are … the letters of correspondence to be licked into shape, and great is the labour and small the profit' (Carrington 1855, 147). The *Preston Herald* claimed it had no time for such labour in 1868, telling a rejected contributor: 'Your letter would require re-writing entirely to make it at all presentable, and we cannot spare the time just now to do so' ('Notices to Correspondents', 17 October 1868). However, journalists were expected to take the time. An 1894 instruction manual advised that

> the editor needs to be generous as well as just - helpful and kindly in the way of emendation or omission. Occasionally, as a means of deserved punishment or for greater effect, the epistle of the unskilled writer may fitly be published *verbatim et literatim*; but, as a rule, editorial amendment is welcomed rather than resented by the illiterate writer and is appreciated by the readers (Mackie 1894, 78).

Note that the literary judgment of 'effect' is one of the considerations in editing a letter. Although usually written by readers, letters were moulded according to journalistic criteria. Other reasons for rejection included 'Too strong in style', 'Too long', and sometimes party political considerations ('Notices to Correspondents', *Preston Chronicle* 8 September 1860, 'Editorial Notices', *Preston Chronicle* 25 February 1871;Buckley 1987, 23). However, these comments also suggest that the majority of correspondence came from readers, rather than journalists.

Journalists exerted the most editorial control when they wrote letters themselves, or commissioned them. I can attest from personal experience that, at least in the 1980s, journalists occasionally wrote letters themselves, passing them off as written by readers. Journalists sometimes chose to ventriloquise through a reader's letter because of the particular meanings of that genre. As Dallas Liddle notes when applying Bakhtin's ideas of genre to journalism, 'genres contain and encode meaning ... genres perform the complex and language-like function of limiting and shaping the terms and available meanings of texts … working to make the text they contain reflect the genre's own worldview' (Liddle 2009, 5). Edward Baines chose to promote the idea of a philosophical and literary society for Leeds

through a letter, signed ‘Leodiensian’, in his own newspaper, the *Leeds Mercury,* instead of using the editorial voice, believing the idea was more likely to be taken up if it appeared to come from the public (Hood 1978, 163). Similarly, in Hull, William Hunt, editor of the *Eastern Morning News,* wrote in his own paper ‘under a *nom de plume’* against smoking at public events. ‘The correspondence was kept up with great spirit for some time’, leading to a ban at the next annual flower show, widely attributed to the letters in his newspaper (Hunt 1887, 95). Some readers were aware of the connotations of these genres. One gave the following advice to the editor of the new *Birmingham Daily Post* in 1857: ‘Never introduce minor subjects into your leaders … Rather than small subjects should occupy your leading space, I would treat such subjects in letters written under fictitious names; then they would not spoil the dignity of your leaders’ (Whates 1957, 59).

The next step along the continuum of editorial mediation was a genre related to readers’ letters, but distinct, usually appearing in a short section before the leader column, entitled ‘Notices to Correspondents’, ‘Editorial Notices’ or similar. Wilkie Collins and others have noted the attraction of such columns, rather like overhearing one side of a conversation ([Collins] 1858). In the Preston papers, this section was used to acknowledge receipt of letters and articles, to explain why such contributions had been rejected or held over, and to answer factual queries and give advice. These answers to queries offered a level of reader involvement below that of the correspondence column; here the editorial voice was dominant, but in direct response to readers (Warren 2000, 123, although such columns never consisted ‘solely’ of the editorial voice) The most gnomic type of reply was a bare ‘No’ (*Preston Chronicle* 1 October 1870). Readers sometimes needed some examples to set them off -- the Jesuit priest in charge of the ‘Answers to Correspondents’ section of Liverpool’s *Northern Press* and *Catholic Times,* ‘with the view of drawing on real enquiries … used to concoct and then answer questions on points of doctrine, etc’ (Denvir 1972, 154).

Readers’ queries covered slightly different subjects than their letters, most notably in the case of sport, seen as a topic of low status, especially in Liberal newspapers. The difference in status (and perhaps in authors) between the correspondence column and replies to correspondents is brought out by the absence of football in the letters column of the *Lancashire Evening Post* in 1890 (none in September and October of that year), while football dominated the readers’ queries, with 12 answers making it the most popular subject. The queries were about dates, scores and other match statistics, mainly concerning Preston North End, occasionally about their Blackburn rivals. Even in the early days of football, fans needed facts, as fuel for discussion and argument, and they turned to the local press (Holt 1989, 168–69). The number of answers to correspondents roughly doubled between 1890 and 1900 in the *Lancashire Evening Post* (see Table 1 below), probably due to rising

circulation, but also due to the Boer War, a General Election campaign and the Taff Vale trades union case in 1900 arousing more reader curiosity and comment. The number of readers' queries was in inverse proportion to the number of letters published in these years (see Table 1 below), raising the possibility that pressure on space from war news forced the editor to merely acknowledge correspondence in 1900, rather than print it in full.

Table 1. Answers to correspondents, 1890 and 1900, *Lancashire Evening Post,* Preston

Topic	1890	1900
Football	12	4
Acknowledging receipt/explaining rejection	11	8
Politics	1	18
Non-local other	1	9
Local other	3	7
Unknown	1	6
Local history	0	7
Geography	0	4
	29	63

Source: LEP, Sept-Oct 1890 and 1900.

The letters

Between one and 20 letters were published in each issue of Preston's main newspapers. Table 2 shows how the number of letters rose and then fell during the period (high numbers in 1868 were due to a general election and controversy over the Irish Church). Without a wider sampling than two months every ten years, it is hard to interpret this downward trend in correspondence during the period. A fall in letters in the *Herald* could be the result of falling circulation, but the same decline is seen in the *Lancashire Evening Post,* which almost certainly increased its readership in the last decade of the century. Numbers of letters were greatly influenced by the currency of particular topics, such as the 1868 Irish Church debate, which more than doubled the number of letters, or a half-day holiday for shop assistants in September 1890, which partly explains the high number of *Evening Post* letters in that year. Conversely, bigger stories such as the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 or the General Election in 1900 could actually reduce the space available for letters, as seen in the *Lancashire Evening Post* during the Boer War in 1900.

Table 2. Number of letters published in September and October for selected years, *Preston Herald, Preston Guardian, Preston Chronicle and Lancashire Evening Post*, 1860-1900

	1860	1867	1868	1870	1880	1890	1900

Preston Herald Bi-weekly except 1860 (weekly)	34	76	190	66	86	23	21
Preston Guardian Bi-weekly except 1900 (weekly)	59	68	78	52	58	8	6
Preston Chronicle Weekly except 1860 (bi-weekly)	56	39	73	51	69	30	
Lancashire Evening Post Daily						117	37

The popularity of readers' correspondence was due in large part to its local focus, with local topics accounting for the majority of letters in the *Preston Herald* in all but one of the sampled years (Table 3). The only exception was 1870, when the Franco-Prussian war dominated the correspondence columns. This British preference continues into the twenty-first century, when readers' letters are still more likely to be about 'specific and localised topics' such as the quality of Bury black puddings, whereas Italian letters 'tend to deal with issues of more general interest such as the meaning of life' (Pounds 2006, 53). Correspondents debated the state of the town, compared it to other places, looked back on its history and tried to characterise it. Writers occasionally used local metaphors, for example arguing that one could 'As well try to stop the flow of the Ribble as to stop the advance of public opinion' (letter from 'W.W.', *Preston Guardian* 11 April 1868). Lancashire dialect was used in letters, particularly in the 1870s (Hobbs 2018, ch. 8), for example, a writer using the pen name 'A Fisicee' wrote a letter entitled 'Doins I Fisic Werd' [Doings in Fishwick Ward], addressed 'To Th' Hedditur o'th Preston Kronicle', entirely in dialect, about the dismissal of a curate (assistant priest) in the local parish church (*Preston Chronicle,* 30 January 1875, 6). Similarly, in the late 20th century in the US, Wahl-Jorgensen (2002, 187) found that the letters page was 'an important part of *The Bay Herald's* attempt to carve out a distinct local identity for itself.' While most of the newspaper's content was shared with four other titles in the same group, each title had its own unique letters page

Table 3. Topics of letters, *Preston Herald* 1860-1900

	1860	**1870**	**1880**	**1890**	**1900**	
Complaints over local bodies & responses	3	13	16	7	4	43
Politics, general	1	23	3	1	2	30
Religion, local		4	16	1		21
Complaints over public nuisance & responses		3	12	3	1	19
Call for improvements	10	1	2	5		18
Politics, local	6	3	6	1	2	18
Inter-personal disputes	1	2	6		6	15
Observations	1	2	8		1	12
Announcements, advice	1	2	3	2	3	11
Religion, general	3	2	2			7

Fund-raising	1	1	1	1	2	6
Corrections	2	2	1		1	6
Other		3	2	1		6
	29	61	78	22	22	

Most letters in Victorian local newspapers were complaints. 'Lumbaginiensis', moaning about uncomfortable trains (*Preston Guardian* 12 October 1872, p.6) claimed 'that proud prerogative of the Englishman … to thrust his grievances into the columns of newspapers', and grievance was indeed the default register, typically complaints about Preston corporation, or public nuisances. Jackson (1971, 153) identified 'exasperation' as the chief motive for writing to the local paper, while Pounds argues that complaint is central to the genre (Pounds 2006, 55). Content analysis of the *Preston Herald* (weekly in 1860, bi-weekly thereafter) during September and October every ten years from 1860 to 1900 found that negative letters about Preston outweighed positive ones by a ratio of four to one, compared to two to one in reported speech and a slight preference for the positive in leader columns and other forms of direct editorial address (25 positive, 18 negative: Hobbs 2018, 289). The correspondence column was the most likely part of the newspaper to include expressions of conflict (defined as two opposing viewpoints in the same article), containing 31 of 49 instances of conflict over Preston identity in the *Preston Herald* (Hobbs 2018, 294).

Most letters were part of a dialogue, either with other correspondents or with newspaper content. The 298 letters to the *Preston Herald* sampled between 1860 and 1900 were categorised as either proactive (setting their own agenda, rather than responding to someone else's) or reactive, with the second category sub-divided according to what they were responding to. Some 186 letters were reactive, 112 were proactive (Table 4; similar categories are used by Pedersen 2002 and Nord 2001).

Table 4. Orientation of readers' letters, *Preston Herald* 1860–1900

Proactive (setting own agenda)	112	
Reactive	186	
Response to news report, same publication		84
Response to letter, same publication		73
Response to news report, other publication		15
Response to letter, other publication		7
Response to leader column		6
Response to advert		1
Total	**298**	

A small proportion of writers responded to letters and articles published in other newspapers, suggesting, to some extent, a unified local public sphere. But comparison between the topics of letters in rival newspapers suggests a splintering of this public sphere. Earlier in the

period, in September and October 1860, 72 per cent of letters in the Liberal *Preston Guardian* and the Conservative *Preston Herald* were on the same topics (62 out of a total of 86). But by the last decade of the century, this common ground had reduced from 72 per cent to 29 per cent (58 out of 198 letters), in a comparison of letters published in the *Herald,* still Conservative, and the Liberal *Lancashire Evening Post* for September and October 1890 and 1900. The same story is told in a decline in the number of readers' letters responding to other papers. In September and October 1860, the *Preston Herald* published nine responses to material in other papers, and in 1868, the *Preston Chronicle* and *Preston Guardian* each published ten letters in response to other papers. But by 1900, the *Herald* published only one such letter in the same two months, and the *Evening Post* only three. At the end of the period, there were two distinct readerships, members of politically differing interpretive communities, who probably bought a copy of their favourite paper, rather than reading it in a news room alongside rival titles (Hobbs 2018, 361, 370 Table 10.1).

The writers

The readers who wrote probably had more in common with the publishers and journalists than with the readership as a whole, so we should be careful not to generalise too much from their evidence. Letter-writers were members of what Stanley Fish called 'interpretive communities' (Fish 1976) from which each local paper sprang, rather than the wider readership. The public sphere of the local newspaper letters page was overwhelmingly bourgeois and male, and the trend away from pen-names and towards signed letters actually made it more difficult for women and working-class readers to take part. Writing a letter for publication, to be read by family, friends and neighbours, also required a certain level of confidence and literary ability, more than the curate in the *Press News* anecdote possessed, so he sub-contracted the task to the schoolmaster.

Letter writers were mainly middle-class. Most occupations and offices held by Preston letter-writers who volunteered such information show a consistent bias to the professions, followed by tradesmen (16 professionals, six tradesmen and only two working class writers in the *Preston Herald* sample). Where writers used occupational pseudonyms, only a tiny minority were avowedly working-class, although they became more frequent when this lent authority to letters because of the topic, as in 1880, when a textile strike loomed. The six letters about the dispute all used working class pseudonyms ('A Cotton Operative', 'A Weaver', 'A Factory Lad', 'An Overlooker') and there was a similar surge of working-class occupational pseudonyms during the 1890 campaign for a shop assistants' half-day holiday, but these were exceptions. Peter Lucas (1971, 61) found that less than ten per cent of letters to

newspapers on the Furness peninsula in north Lancashire, between 1846 and 1880, could be identified as coming from working-class writers.

It was generally unacceptable for women to write letters, in Preston's papers at least. Women began to take a more active part in the public life of Preston during this period, with single women gaining the municipal franchise in 1869, the right to stand for the Board of Guardians from 1875, and the right to vote for and serve on parish, urban and rural district councils in 1894, but this broadening public sphere was not reflected in local correspondence columns. (Hollis 1987, 207, 357, 392). Only 12 out of some 900 letters in the sample purported to be from women, and only three carried a woman's full name (two were writers of circular charity appeals, *Lancashire Evening Post* 24 October 1900; *Preston Herald* 3 September 1870), the third was the sister of a local landowner (*Preston Chronicle* 18 May 1878). Seven letters used female pseudonyms, but only four appear genuine – those from 'A Wife And A Liberal', 'A Housekeeper', 'Lucretia Nettle' and 'A Dressmaker', the first and third of these calling for women to have the vote (*Preston Guardian* 1 June 1867, 5 October 1867; *Preston Herald* 24 September 1867; *Lancashire Evening Post* 27 October 1890). The other three - from Mary Ann, Polly and Mariana – were probably written by men, judging by the subject matter. **'**Mariana', meaning 'Star of the Sea', was the signature on a letter about a Fleetwood boat accident (*Preston Chronicle* 22 June 1878); the other two letters, from 'Mary Ann' (*Preston Chronicle* 12 September 1868) and 'Polly' (*Preston Guardian* 24 October 1868) both appear to be using a female persona for comic effect. Two other writers identified themselves as mothers in their letters, but not in their initials (EE and CE), in a debate about Preston's high infant mortality figures (*Lancashire Evening Post* 23 and 25 October 1890). However, what was published may not reflect what was submitted – the *Ulverston Advertiser* reported 'a deluge of letters from Miss A or Miss B requesting a few words' in support of women's suffrage in 1872, but none of them were published (Lucas 2002, 293).

Mary Smith of Carlisle (1822-89), an impoverished schoolteacher, governess and frustrated poet, is an unusual but instructive example of a woman of the 'lower orders' who did write letters to local newspapers, using a wide vocabulary of pseudonyms. The daughter of a shoemaker and a cook, she was nevertheless well educated, served as a governess to Nonconformist families and ran a succession of schools. She became part of national networks of Nonconformist preachers and radical journalists, which gave her a high level of cultural capital. She read books, periodicals and newspapers avidly, and had poetry, news reports, feature articles and letters published in national and local periodicals, and in local newspapers. This made her part of the same discursive community as the newspaper publishers and editors, and probably gave her confidence and an understanding of how to

get published. In the early 1850s she ‘wrote letters to the newspapers, advocating anti-capital punishment views’ in protest at a public execution in Carlisle (Smith 1892, 198). Inspired by Lydia Becker, she formed a local women’s suffrage society in the 1860s and ‘wrote whenever I could in favour of the Married Women's Property Bill, and against that disgrace to humanity, the "C. D. Acts"’ [Contagious Diseases Acts, which allowed the arrest and compulsory medical examination of women suspected of prostitution]. She sometimes used her initials for ‘letters and other papers’ but ‘in writing on politics, which I often did, I used some other initial, “Z” very often, or other signature. I considered that if men knew who the writer was, they would say, “What does a woman know about politics?”’ (Smith 1892, 258, 259). Without Smith’s memoir, we would not know that a woman had written these letters, raising doubts over the historian’s ability to assess the proportion of anonymous and pseudonymous letters written by women and other less powerful groups.

Higher-status letter-writers did not face the barriers encountered by women and working-class writers. Indeed, editors sometimes collaborated with them, treating them like paid contributors rather than members of the public, thus showing again that readers’ letters were a journalistic category. *Preston Guardian* publisher George Toulmin enabled fellow Liberal Edward Ambler (a printer) to publish a series of letters in support of a prospective Parliamentary candidate (Ambler 1864), and one *Preston Chronicle* correspondent, Edward Foster (a chemist), was able to correct a proof of his letter (3 September 1864). Wahl-Jorgensen (2007, 201–4) found that some modern-day newspapers invited or commissioned local elites to write letters, to combat the perceived 'insanity' of the letters section.

Pseudonyms as rhetorical devices

Letter-writers’ use of pseudonyms declined rapidly in the second half of the nineteenth century (Fig. 1 below), cutting off a rhetorical resource, and possibly reducing the opportunities for women and working-class letter-writers, who had previously been judged on the merits of their letters rather than their class or gender. Correspondence in the *Preston Herald* was fairly typical, with 60 per cent of letters pseudonymous in 1860, rising to a peak in 1880, when 80 per cent were signed with pseudonyms, before declining rapidly to around ten per cent by 1900 (Fig 33 above). It is harder to explain the growth of the pseudonym in the 1860s and 1870s than its decline after 1880, which follows the trend in metropolitan journalism from anonymous to signed journalism (Liddle 1997).

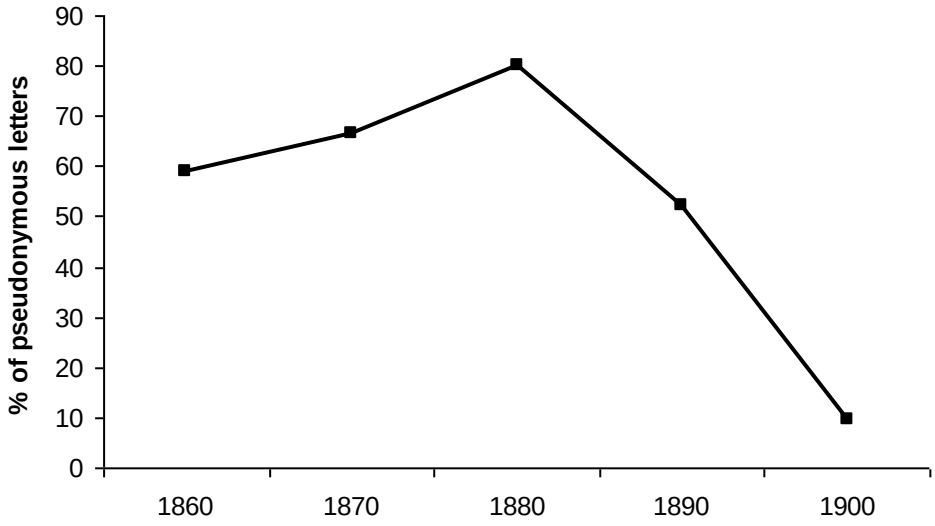

Fig. 1. Percentage of pseudonymous letters to *Preston Herald*, 1860-1900 (*n* = 230)

Many writers used multiple pseudonyms. George Salisbury, an auctioneer in Blackburn, Lancashire, had letters published in newspapers in Blackburn, Preston and Bury, using pen-names including 'John Smith', 'Fan Smith', 'Cottonicus', 'Jeremiah Jinks' and 'Betsy Jinks' (Hull 1902). His pseudonyms crossed gender boundaries, but readers probably understood the rules of the genre, and did not necessarily believe that the writer signing as 'Betsy Jinks' was a woman. Mary Smith of Carlisle also used various assumed identities, as when some working men asked her to write on behalf of their candidate in an election. One pen-name was 'Burns Redivivus', parodying popular Scotch ballads (Smith 1892, 260).

Most pseudonyms were related to the topic of the letter, influencing trends in choice of pseudonym, and differences between papers. They were carefully chosen as a rhetorical device, enabling writers to continue their argument into the signature, and end on a pithy high note. When compiled as a list (see Supplementary Tables 1-2), these pseudonyms become found poetry, so dense are they in meaning, in linguistic playfulness and creativity. In a few terse words, they reveal the concerns, divisions, obsessions and humour of provincial Victorian society. Only a small minority were completely anonymous to other readers, such as those signing their letters 'XYZ', and yet fewer were unknown to the editor, who insisted that correspondents supply their real names, as *bona fides*.

Letter-writers often chose a pseudonym that would justify to other readers (and perhaps to the editor) why their correspondence deserved to be published. Similarly, Pedersen (2004) believes that women's pen-names in early 20th-century Aberdeen newspapers were used to 'construct a civic identity', to justify the women writers' intrusion into the public sphere. About

half of the 300 or so pseudonyms sampled from correspondence columns in Preston's four main papers claimed, or pleaded, entitlement to speak publicly on the topic in question, suggesting that publication was seen as something to be earned or granted, a privilege not a right. Pseudonyms pleaded for this privilege either on the basis of occupation ('A Tradesman', 'An Operative'), position ('A Sunday School Teacher', 'A Tenant') or citizenship and membership ('A Large Ratepayer', 'One Of The Parishioners'), often appealing to length of residence or membership, as in 'a parishioner of thirty years' standing'. A subset of these claims to citizenship were explicitly Preston-related names, such as 'A Prestonian'. Surprisingly, this type of pseudonym was also used in the new town of Barrow as early as 1863 ('Barrowite' and 'Barrovian', for example: Lucas 1971).

Conclusions

This chapter has argued that letters to the editor in Victorian English local newspapers were a highly mediated genre of journalism, rather than a simple open forum. Selection, or rather self-selection and self-censorship, began even before letters were written, as many readers, rightly or wrongly, believed they lacked the cultural capital, or the literacy, to successfully writer a letter to the local paper – the Carlisle working men and the curate in the *Press News* anecdote at the start of this chapter all commissioned a schoolteacher as their ghost-writer. Genres have their own rules, followed by journalists and letter-writers, and understood by readers, for example, that the main purpose of a letter was complaint. We cannot trust any one letter as evidence, unless we know its provenance from other sources, because some letters were written by journalists, or ghost-writers. However, made-up letters only work if they tap into something genuine, and most 'readers' letters' probably were written by readers. This means that we can use content analysis to assess patterns and trends, such as the topics of letters, the splintering of local public spheres or the decline in anonymity. The rules of the genre were also historically and geographically specific – they varied between newspapers (and possibly between regions), and changed over time. Letters to the editor were a distinct type of journalism, and the rich use of pseudonyms reminds us of their performativity, like modern social media (Cover 2012). And like social media, or Victorian fiction, they give us a distinctive insight into a society's concerns.

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Supplementary online material?

Supplementary Table 1. Pseudonyms of letter-writers, *Preston Guardian* and *Preston Chronicle*, September/October 1867

***Preston Guardian* 1867**	***Preston Chronicle* 1867**
A Constant Reader Since 1844	A Burgess (x3)
A Friend of the Shopkeepers	A Lancashire Conservator
A Housekeeper	A Merchant
A Large Ratepayer	A Native of Preston
A Large Ratepayer for 31 Years Past	A Poor Man
A Lover of Bells	A Prestonian (x2)
A Lover of Justice	A Ratepayer
A Poor Member	A Tenant
A Prestonian	An Injured Party
A Property Owner	An Observer (x2)
A Ratepayer (x4)	An Old Townsman
A Sergeant	Another Lover of the Beautiful
A Sunday School Teacher	Another Ratepayer (x3)
A Tradesman	Argus
A Twenty Six Years' member	Bucephalus
A Twenty-Years Ratepayer Without a Town Hall Ticket	Clapper
A Young Merchant	Clericus
ABC	D.W.
An Assistant (x2)	Economist
An Invalid	Gallantry
An On-Looker (x2)	Quaver
Another Lover of the Beautiful	R.M.
Another Ratepayer (x2)	The New Town Hall
Burnley	Waterside
Cottage Owner	
Cottager	
Fishergate Hill	
JFC	
JP	
Microscope	
Night Light	
One For A Many	
One Of The Parishioners	
One Who Wishes to See the Sabbath Day Kept Holy	
Opifex	
Orangemen	
P.P.	
Paterfamilias	
Pro Bono Publico	
Reason	
RM	
The New Town-Hall	
Think Of Others As Well As Myself	
Tobey	
UC	

Y

Supplementary Table 2. Pseudonyms of letter-writers, *Preston Guardian* and *Chronicle*, September/October 1868

***Preston Guardian* 1868**	***Preston Chronicle* 1868**
A Conservative Liberal	A Burgess (x2)
A Freeholder (x3)	A Catholic
A Fylde Farmer	A Churchman
A Fylde Liberal	A Father
A Liberal	A Fylde Man
A Liberal Churchman	A Liberal
A Newly-Enfranchised Elector	A Looker-On (x2)
A Passenger	A Lover of Truth
A Resident of Club St	A Protestant
A Watcher	A Subscriber
A Wesleyan (x3)	A Townsman
A Wesleyan Layman (x2)	A Wesleyan
A Wesleyan local preacher	A Wesleyan Layman (x4)
An Elector	A Wesleyan Methodist
An Eye Witness	Amicus
An Old Inhabitant	An Independent Protestant
An Old Political Pioneer (x2)	An Old Liberal
An Old Reformer	An Old Political Pioneer (x2)
Another Mentor	An Operative
Another Vicar in the Fylde	Anti-Barkerite
Another Wesleyan Layman	Archimedian Screw
Anti-Barkerite	Bell Metal
Decency	Blue Gown
Experientia Docet	Elector
JP	Enquirer
Justice	Equality
Justitia (x3)	F.R.-W.P.
Light	Home Fed
Looker-On	Honesty and Decency
Mentor	Inquirer
Nimrod	Johannem (x2)
One Behind The Counter	John
One in the Secret	Keep To The Point
One Of Yourselves	Listener
One Who Hates Lying	Mary Ann
One Who Knows All About It	Mentor
One Who Looked On At The Meeting	Nimrod
One Who Won't Be Stuffed	Not For Joe
Polly	Number One
Punctuality	Old Style
TF (x3)	One Who Knows All About It
TH	One Who Knows Him
Tummus Treddle	On-Looker
Under The Screw	Purity
Viator	Reason
WW (x2)	Sensible Pleasure
	Storm In A Teapot

T.
T.B.
T.H.
Tea-Total
Tempus
This World
Voter