

The International Typographical Trade Press and Labour Identity in Colonial Spaces

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Introduction

Anglophone print trade unions had their origins in the early 1800s. Print unions emerged from the Western European trade guild systems that had governed the trade since the start of commercial printing in the mid-fifteenth century. Beginning in the 1840s, emerging print trade unions and trade pioneers began launching typographical trade journals in the UK and overseas. Many were short-lived, or underwent multiple transformations of title, frequency and format throughout their appearance. They included London based titles such as the *Compositors' Chronicle* (1840-1843), the *Typographical Gazette* (1846-1847), the *Typographical Protection Gazette* (1846-1847) and the *Typographical Circular* (1854-1858).

Linked print trade journals joining Edinburgh, London and Melbourne included the *Scottish Typographical Circular* (1857-1909), renamed the *Scottish Typographical Journal* in 1909, the London based *Typographical Circular* (1854-1858), and the *Australian Typographical Circular* (1858-1860). UK regional titles included the Manchester based *Typographical Societies' Monthly Circular* (1852-1874), transformed into the *Typographical Circular* in 1877, and the *Leeds Typographical Circular*, begun in 1888. Between 1870 and 1912, colonial print trade journals would be launched in Australia (*Australasian Typographical Journal*), South Africa (*South African Typographical Journal*) and India (*The Indian Printers' Journal*).

Ambitious Aims

As I've noted elsewhere, the aim of these journals was to inform, to entertain, to support the development of a cooperative, shared professional trade identity, and to shape industrial relations locally, regionally and internationally (Finkelstein 2018a, 2018b). The written word was seen as a powerful tool for engaging with fellow print trade members. The *Typographical Circular* in 1854 welcomed contributions from its readers, "because it is the epitome of such men –thoughtful, studious, and well-informed –which generally sway the decisions of the Trade Delegates in chapel, and are of more importance than the windy speeches of empty orators" (Anon 1854, 1).

An early Antipodean example, *The Australian Typographical Circular*, launched in January 1858 by the Victoria Typographical Association, saw its mission similarly in providing a trade resource for everyone involved in Australian printing. The goal, as the initial editorial made clear, was to be as comprehensive as possible, and to extend knowledge beyond the regional boundaries of the trade in Victoria. “We disclaim any desire on our part to limit its sphere of usefulness to this colony,” it noted, though its comprehensiveness had then to rely on the willingness of regional correspondents to supply the journal with supporting material (Anon 1858a, 1). Its combination of creative material and trade information was greeted positively by many in the trade, including the editor of the *Scottish Typographical Circular*, who declared, “We wish to our contemporary a useful and a successful career” (Anon 1858b). Long lasting it was not to be, ceasing publication two years later, having failed to attract sufficient paid subscriptions to fully cover printing costs.

Australian print trade journal interest resurfaced in November 1870, when the *Australasian Typographical Journal* was launched, backed by Melbourne print union members, and covering Australian and New Zealand focused trade news. Like its earlier counterpart, the journal served as a labour organising outlet, educating colonial print journeymen on Australasian trade policies, industrial regulations and labour issues, while also preparing the ground for wider national organisation (Fitzgerald 1967, 54).

When the newly formed South African Typographical Union launched an accompanying monthly journal in March 1898, it also declared a mission to represent the print trade and provide South African related news. Indian based titles were less prevalent, hampered by the lack of organised print trade unions capable of financially backing such operations. An Indian Printers’ Union would only haltingly emerge in Calcutta in 1905, aimed at supporting its members with social benefit schemes, night schools, educational stipends and bereavement funds (Finkelstein 2018a). Two monthly journals, similarly entitled the *Indian Printers’ Journal*, flourished briefly in 1895-1896 (published out of Rajkot) and 1912-13 (issued from Bombay). Both held dear the need to inform fellow Indian print colleagues of trade news and innovations, with the 1895 version also committed to raising standards of Indian printing through encouraging best practice and featuring exemplars in its pages.

Information conduits

Trade journals were information conduits for the so-called ‘tramping system’, which trade guilds and print unions across the colonial world utilised throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a means of organising and controlling labour activity. Unions financially supported movement of members across local and regional trade circuits during moments of strike action or when economic and trade conditions dictated, and from the mid-nineteenth century onwards also provided emigration grants to part cover travel costs of members ranging overseas. Typographical journals tracked such membership movement by publishing monthly lists logging arrivals of emigrant artisans registered with international union branches. They also provided information on printers who had ‘cleared’ their membership and taken up bona fide union cards and passes, allowing travel and work further along national and international print trade networks.

Such details were part and parcel of journals acting as labour information exchanges, participating in an international circulation of news and material through the printing of trade letters and notices, the issuing of news items from locally based sources, and the reprinting of official lists and communiques from union representatives and secretaries. The international recirculation of news and trade items was often done through ‘scissor and paste’ journalism methods, whereby cuttings gleaned through exchanges of journal issues between editors were reprinted verbatim. Thus common threads of news, speeches and announcements could be found moving across time and space, reported and repeated from one international journal to the next.

A common feature of print trade journals was trade news provided by overseas correspondents, many of whom were cultural mediators active in union organisation. South Africa and Australia in particular were strongly linked through a two way flow of skilled print labourers, many of whom frequently crossed borders to hone printing and union organising skills in both countries.

Restricted Moral Communities

Such trade journals saw themselves as chroniclers of contemporary print labour discourse and concerns. The rhetoric in their pages espoused a moral community of labour brotherhood bound by shared trade heritage, artisanal skill and craft history (Finkelstein 2018). They offered aspiring contributors and readers a vision of craft identity that extended beyond the compositor

space, and complicated notions of rigid class and professional identity through extolling and celebrating cross-class movement and success.

Printing personnel and print trade union organisers were global figures with international reach, traversing freely across imperial spaces, intent on building up connected print trade outlets and communication centres. However, when it came to colonial spaces, not all printers were created equal. As Isabel Hofmeyr has noted, “These laboring men were less print capitalists than what we might call “print laborists” -men who attempted to define printing as part of white racial privilege. The print capitalists, proprietors, and master printers for whom they worked shared their racial ideologies if not their laborists proclivities” (Hofmeyr 2013, 34).

Print unions in colonial spaces invariably emphasised colonial divisions of race, identity and trade skills. Official labour union rhetoric, particularly in South Africa and Australia, emphasised a trade identity that was overwhelmingly white, male and colonialist in intention. Typographical union journals in Australia and South Africa represented such dominant voices and opinions in editorials and trade columns, supporting consensus trade union views in favour of white labour dominance in a white dominated country. They also had little positive to say about Indian, African, and other non-white workers labouring as outsiders on the margins of white colonial trade spaces. When such print trade artisans appeared in the pages of such colonial trade journals and union records, they made their entrance surreptitiously, used to exemplify existential threats to white artisanal livelihoods, offered as examples of inferior masters of the art of printing (requiring time and effort to oversee, manage and shape), or seen quietly requesting and being denied equal opportunities for representation in the wider ‘brotherhood of printing’ espoused in the slogans, banners, training and rituals marking craft uniqueness.

Indian print labourer communities

The supposed threat to white printers posed by Indian and native print artisans, for example, was closely commented on in South Africa and Australian print journals. A beady eye was cast over colonial examples of Indian print labourer intrusion, such as the importation into Australia in the 1850s of Indian compositors from Madras to set type for the *Empire* newspaper (Neame 1907, 71). L.E. Neame, a prominent Johannesburg journalist for the *Rand Daily Mail*, editor for a period of the *Times of India*, and high profile advocate for exclusionary white policies, noted with concern in 1907 that such initiatives, alongside South African examples

such as the 1896 importation into Natal of Indian indentured artisans, including composers, were mere preludes to an overwhelming future deluge of clever, ambitious and successful brown and yellow skinned artisanal disrupters of the white colonial status quo. “No one can possess a greater admiration for India and the Indian peoples,” he claimed disingenuously but, “A decision against Asiatic immigration in the Colonies is in no way due to a lack of appreciation of Asiatic virtues—it is rather a testimonial to Asiatic capacity for succeeding” (Neame 1907, viii).

While not allowed to join unionised spaces until later in the twentieth century, Indian focused printers and printing enterprises in South Africa were generally left to their own devices. The International Printing Press, started in Durban in 1898 by Mohandas K. Gandhi, made an appearance in union records in one such case. A South African Typographical Union member was hired in 1899 to help with its printing needs, and sought special permission to join the non-unionised Indian print concern. ‘In his report to a general meeting in October,’ the relevant Journal issue recorded, “the Branch Secretary refers to an application from the proprietor of an Indian printing office to employ a Union member, which was granted, and an unemployed member secured a situation on satisfactory terms” (Downes 1952, 99; See also Hofmeyr 2013, 50.)

Black print labourer communities

Indian labour may have been partially acceptable but sidelined or ignored on the basis of racial views of competence and potential in some colonial spaces. Black African print labourers were not accorded such privileges in South Africa. Vocal South African Typographical Union members made that clear in repetitious reports and letters to the journal denying agency to such print labourers, and desecrating those who employed them. Despite their frequent and successful presence in non-unionised print establishments, Black and Coloured print workers were classed as mere ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’, fit mainly for unskilled work, not precise compositor tasks. One 1899 correspondent argued that those proprietors who supported equality in workspaces (and in the process unequal pay) were to be discouraged, for their actions damaged the cause of the white labouring classes. ‘I hope one day,’ the correspondent concluded, ‘to see the Union throw itself full force against this class of proprietor, who makes white and black stand side by side as equals, and endeavour to bring him to reason by promoting a more generous feeling in his greedy heart’ (Anon 1899, 13; Anon 1902c, 9).

When native workers attempted to join the dominant unions, they were denied access. An example noted in the *South African Typographical Journal* concerned the Union conference in Durban in April 1902, when the East London Branch petitioned for ‘a subsidiary union for Natives to be formed’. It was batted away for consideration the following year, then quietly dropped (Downes 1952, 175). When a printer at the Mission Station in Natal applied for union membership in 1903, the March 1903 issue of *South African Typographical Journal* recorded that he was advised to go organise a Native trade union instead (Downes 1952, 106).

Such views remained prevalent in subsequent colonial trade journal contributions. A February 1909 article in the *South African Typographical Journal* entitled ‘The Evils of Missions’, featured strenuous pronouncements on the threat to the status quo of mission print centres and Native print workers. “The practice of certain mission stations in running printing plants on low-paid Native labour is condemned as a danger to the standards of living of the white worker,” it declaimed in shrill terms (quoted in Downes 1952, 200). Such individuals, recruited to work for wages significantly below those laid down by union negotiations in key districts, threatened white labour interests. “The fundamental creed of the white man,” concluded the piece, “is to maintain the supremacy of the race: the teaching of trades to the negro tends to place him on an equal footing with the white man. This must not be -and the solution? Segregation” (quoted in Downes 1952, 200).

When there was cultural interaction, strict racial barriers were in place to prevent mixed social connections outside work spaces, and these were reported in such terms. Thus we find reports of a Wayzgoose, or day social outing, organised by employees of the Kimberley based *Diamond Fields Advertiser* in October 1903, notice of which was reprinted in the November issue of the *South African Typographical Circular*. The news item informed readers that objections had been raised at the inclusion of a number of Coloured workers in the proceedings. “It was therefore decided,” the summary noted, “that they should hold one of their own, the Company kindly granting them a sum of money and providing them with prizes, and accordingly some four or five set out for the picturesque banks of the Modderr. Athletic sports were held, and, I am told the most interesting event of the day was the veteran’s race” (Anon 1903c, 5-6).

Trans-imperial colonial discourse and identity

These and other examples offer insights into the colonial capitalist discourse present in key colonial print trade journals. Such journals shared locally grounded views on generalised labour questions. They purported to support the transnational circulation of trade information, filtered through recognised artisanal identities, and drawing on shared trade language and themes to connect directly to intended audiences. In colonial periodical press arenas, international social identity, labour and trade capital was strongly linked to colonial intentions, and viewed through the lens of colonial trade agendas. Thus indigenous artisanal print labourers were invariably framed within a ‘white labourist’ racial discourse of unequal status, serving as lesser skilled backdrops and threats to white hegemony and labour aspirations. Typographical journals representing mainstream print labour union consensus fed into wider, trans-imperial discourses of colonialism. Trade identity was enmeshed in a broader, collective, trans-global British settler identity, what Daniel Dunoon identified in the 1980s as instances of ‘settler capitalism’ (Dunoon 1983), marking the imprinting of trade and labour structures on colonial soil, with attendant social constructs and racial boundaries hedging what was proffered in the pages of colonial trade journals.

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