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LOOKING FOR THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS IN AUSTRALIAN DIGITAL NEWSPAPERS
Colonial readership and the formation of imagined communities, 1842–1872

Thomas Smits

This article will demonstrate that digital newspaper archives can be used to shed new light on the historical readership of nineteenth-century newspapers and magazines. The digital newspaper archive of Australia (Trove) was used to study the distribution and reception of the renowned Illustrated London News (ILN) in the Australian colonies between 1842 and 1872. As a result of this research, this article shows that around 17,000 copies of the magazine reached the Australian colonies by each mail in 1862. This corresponds to 8–11% of the total circulation of the ILN at that time so making it the most widely read British publication in the Australian colonies. By means of a case study into the colonial readership of the ILN, this article will argue that the magazine was an important building block in the formation of the imagined communities both of Britain and its dominions in the period between 1842 and 1872.

KEYWORDS historical readership; digital newspaper archives; Illustrated London News; imagined communities; Trove

Introduction

The Illustrated London News (ILN from now on) was the first publication in history to regularly combine news images and text and boasted one of the highest circulations of the London-based press in the mid-nineteenth century. Starting with a modest circulation of 23,000 copies in 1842, the publication claimed to sell around 130,000 copies by 1855, while the print run of special issues, such as the supplement on the Indian Rebellion of 1857, reportedly sold as many as 500,000 copies.¹ The ILN is rightly considered as one of the most important building blocks of the British imagined community; the concept famously coined by Benedict Anderson.² By closely studying the nature of its visual and textual representations, several historians, including Peter Sinnema, Virginia McKendry, and Jude Piesse, have shown that the ILN played an important role in the formation of a national British identity.³

However, the ILN regularly prided itself on the fact that it was read, or rather seen, all over the world. It was, according to the magazine itself, especially popular in the British colonies:

To our colonies this Journal has an interest, which can be claimed by no other. The Australian or the Canadian settled in remote districts, (…), looks forward with more pleasure
to the arrival of the Illustrated London News than to that of any other, whether daily or weekly paper.4

The importance of the ILN was also recognized in these ‘remote districts’. Henry Parkes—one of the founding fathers of the Australian Federation—stated in the Legislative Council of September 1854 that its members

(…) should not place any restriction upon the dissemination of so much instruction and amusement. He had no doubt at all, from what he had heard of the large circulation of this journal, that it was seen by nearly every respectable family in the colony.5

This article will demonstrate that digital newspaper archives can shed new light on the historical readership of nineteenth-century publications. The case study of the distribution and reception of the ILN in Australia will show that the owners of the magazine actively sought a colonial audience and that this colonial market was vital for its success. On this basis, I will challenge the view that the ILN contributed only to the production of a British identity. I will argue that the magazine was not only an important building block for the British, but also for several specific colonial imagined communities in the period between 1842 and 1872.

After some remarks on historiography, methods, and periodization, this article will discuss the reception of the ILN in colonial Australia in two sections. The first one will show that the magazine was the most widely read British publication in the Australian colonies. It will also describe some important characteristics of the colonial audience. In the second section the reasons for this popularity are discussed. In a more general sense, this article aspires to show that digital newspaper archives can be used to answer some long-standing questions concerning nineteenth-century historical readership.

**British or Colonial Identity?**

Historical research concerning the ILN had a bibliographical nature for a long time.6 Since the late 1990s the magazine has mainly been used to study the production of British identity. Benedict Anderson’s imagined community has been the most influential theoretical concept in this kind of research, although other frameworks, such as Hobsbawm’s and Ranger’s invented tradition have also been applied.7

Historian Peter Sinnema is seen by many as the authority on the ILN and the production of identity; his research focuses on the visual and textual representations of the magazine to describe what kind of imagined community it supports.8 Sinnema convincingly shows that British identity was mainly formed ex negativo in the ILN. The visual and textual representations of ‘others’ in the magazine, which in Sinnema’s view are mostly ‘(…) non-English and non-bourgeois’, are responsible for the production of a national imagined community.9 In her article ‘Dreaming Across Oceans’ (2013) Jude Piesse similarly applies Anderson’s concept to study the effect of the special Christmas issues of the ILN and other London weeklies on the formation of British identity in both the colonies and Britain. She argues that the Christmas issues offer a ‘cohesive and reassuring’ narrative that is meant to contain the destabilizing effect of large-scale migration on the formation of national identity in the mid-nineteenth century.10 The production of
national identity by other European illustrated newspapers, like the German Die Garten-
laube and Die Leipziger Illustrirte Zeitung, has also been studied with the imagined commu-
nity as the key theoretical concept.11

In his book News and the British World (2003), Simon Potter objects to historians who
force the history of the British press into a national mold. For him it is clear that Anderson’s
‘(...)’ famous argument that the press encouraged readers to “imagine” themselves pri-
marily as members of national communities is overly simplistic’.12 He argues that newspa-
pers and magazines helped to sustain a multiplicity of identities both in Britain and the
Dominions. First, regional identities continued to be important, supported in a novel
way by the blossoming nineteenth-century provincial press.13 In addition, Anderson’s
emphasis on national identity tends to overshadow ‘(...)’ the impact on the press of
forces that transcended the boundaries of modern nations’.14 Potter suggests that the
strong imperial element of news stories presented to audiences all over the British
world made sure that these audiences could ‘imagine’ themselves to be a part of an imper-
ial community; a form of identity that he describes as a ‘sense of overarching Britishness’.15

In his inspiring work on British settler communities, Allan Lester makes a similar point,
arguing that settler newspapers ‘(...)’ helped to bind settlers located in different colonial
sites into a broader collective imagination based on the idea of a trans-global British settler
community.16

In my opinion, if we are prepared to ignore the fact that Anderson’s theory has been
applied mainly to the national press and the production of national identity, we can use it
to underpin our understanding of the simultaneous production of multiple identities. This
point is stressed by Peter Putnis in his article ‘News, Time and Imagined Community in
Colonial Australia’ (2010).17 Readers in the Australian colonies often received British
papers with a delay of a few months. Therefore, their commonly experienced world,
partly mediated by British publications, was different from that of London-based
readers. Anderson himself, when explaining the burgeoning nationalism of American
states in the context of the colonial Spanish empire in the late eighteenth and early nine-
teenth centuries, similarly points to the central signiﬁcance of time for the formation of
imagined communities in a colonial context:

[we have seen] how important to that imagined community is an idea of steady, solid
simultaneity through time. Such a simultaneity the immense stretch of the Spanish Amer-
ican Empire, and the isolation of its component parts, made difﬁcult to imagine.18

This article aspires to expand on the points made by Lester, Potter, and Putnis. It
argues that a massively distributed publication like the ILN contributed to the production
of a national identity coupled with the production of multiple colonial identities. It uses
Anderson’s emphasis on simultaneity to show that the reading of a single publication by
multiple audiences located in different ‘time zones’ resulted in the production of several
imagined communities. This article agrees with Lester and Potter in stating that the ILN
instilled a ‘sense of Britishness’ in its Australian readers. However, it points out that this
‘sense’ was in fact not ‘overarching’ at all, but intrinsically linked to the Australian colonial
context. Potter’s sense of Britishness could never become overarching because the differ-
ent colonial peripheries lacked simultaneity. In relation to this, Lester’s designation of an
overarching colonial identity as a ‘discourse’ is important.19 In my view, Potter’s ‘sense of
Britishness’ should be seen as a form of political discourse, mimicking a form of identity, rather than as a ‘true’ form of identity: an imagined community, based on simultaneous experience mediated by the press.

Method and Periodization

It is not surprising that the production of identity by the ILN has mainly been studied by researching the nature of its visual and textual representation. It was widely held that the historical readership of a publication, or even its geographical distribution, was difficult to trace.20 As a result, the boundaries of the imagined communities that were supported by a certain publication were seen as very hard to pin down. Because of these theoretical and methodological difficulties, it seemed more feasible to study the boundaries of the imagined community by looking at what kind of identity was represented. However, the creation of digital newspaper archives has enabled research into the availability and reception of a publication in a specific geographical context. As such, they can be used to shed new light on the historical readers of the ILN and therefore on the production of specific forms of identity.

Historians from different fields agree that digital newspaper archives offer reliable data for research on the reception of books.21 However, this kind of research has been scarcely applied to more ephemeral publications, such as newspapers and magazines. The digital research of this article is based on the premise that media write about other media, especially if they were as successful as the ILN around the mid-nineteenth century. In order to answer the two central questions of this article—who in the Australian colonies read the ILN and why did they do this?—articles concerning the ILN had to be located in the Australian colonial press.

Until the foundation of the Graphic in 1869, the ILN dominated the British market. Competitors were either bought out by the ILN’s wealthy proprietor Herbert Ingram—like Henry Vizetelly’s Illustrated Times—or they were simply priced out of the market. This dominance suggests that the magazine would have been popular in the Australian colonies during the same period. Indeed, this claim is substantiated through a search of Australia’s digital newspaper archive (Trove) with the keywords ‘Illustrated London News’ for the period 1842–1872. The results, displayed in Figure 1, show that Australian newspapers started to discuss the ILN in the late 1840s. During the 1850s, the numbers of articles concerning the ILN continued to grow, reaching the highest point in 1859, after which interest in the magazine began to decline. The fast-growing number of advertisements in the 1850s also suggests that the magazine became increasingly available in the Australian colonies during this period.

However, this kind of ‘distant reading’ of Trove remains problematic. While a keyword search for ‘Illustrated London News’ turns out more hits for the 1850s, this is not necessarily indicative of the magazine’s growing popularity during the period. The same goes for the data covering the aforementioned growth in advertisements for the ILN during the period in question. Several historians have pointed out that the Australian press boomed around the mid-nineteenth century.22 I used the API of Trove to construct a database that shows that this growth in the number of titles and issues (many weekly newspapers started to publish bi-weekly or daily) is reflected in Trove. Yet the extent of this growth remains unclear (see Figures 2 and 3). Although the website of the Australian Newspaper Digitisation
Program states that it is the long-term objective of the program ‘to make freely available all Australian newspapers published prior to 1955’, it is unclear how close the program has come to reaching this goal.23

Trying to demonstrate the increasing popularity of the *ILN* by simply counting how frequently it is referenced in an increasing number of titles and issues is indeed problematic. However, the decreasing number of hits during the late 1860s does point to the declining popularity of the magazine in the Australian colonies. After all, as Figures 2 and 3 show, the amount of material available in *Trove* continued to grow during this period: the decline in hits is significant because the size of the archive moves in the other direction. In short, the number of hits in a digital newspaper archive can be used as an indication of either increasing or decreasing popularity if the size of the archive—the amount of available material—shrinks or grows in the opposite direction.

In their digital form, scanned newspapers offer direct access to articles.24 Maarten van den Bos and Hermione Giffard have described how this aspect of digital meditation might lead to the perceived ‘digital equality’ of all articles found through a keyword search.25 Interfaces, such as *Trove*, suggest that the information contained in the source material is equally valuable. Several historians have argued that researchers should assess the relative importance of sources and pay attention to the conditions under which newspapers and magazines were published. In other words: researchers should re-contextualize the information to which they now have direct digital access.26 Therefore, the research for this article is centered on articles and advertisements in four newspapers from Melbourne and Sydney—the two largest cities of the Australian colonies around

![Figure 1](image-url)
1850—with relatively large circulations: The Empire, The Sydney Morning Herald, The Age, and The Argus. Figure 4 demonstrates that the development in ILN coverage in these four major Australian newspapers is representative of the Australian press as a whole.

Many of the hits in Trove do not provide information concerning the two central questions of this article. As the ILN became popular, Australian publications started to clip articles from the magazine on a large scale. Bob Nicholson and Melodee Beals have used digital methodologies to study effectively this so-called scissor-paste nature of the nineteenth-century press and have shown its importance in processes of cultural transfer. However, in relation to the central questions of this article, the clippings of the ILN in the Australian press only show that the magazine was popular, while revealing little about the nature of this popularity. Most relevant for this article is the period in which we find the most hits in Trove that refer to articles which actually concern the ILN, as opposed to those articles which have been clipped directly from the magazine. Figure 5 shows that this was the case between 1855 and 1864, when the difference between the number of articles concerning the ILN and clippings from the magazine was the greatest.

The majority of this article is not based on a distant reading of Trove, but on qualitative ‘close reading’ of the articles in the Australian press concerning the ILN. While counting hits can be useful in establishing the popularity of ILN in the Australian colonies, the data of Trove is too unstable to draw any more far-reaching conclusions about the nature of this popularity. For example, as Figure 6 shows, a repeatedly placed advertisement in a newspaper with a high OCR-quality can quickly distort results.
Distant reading has been used to substantiate the periodization of research. The Australian press wrote about *ILN* from the foundation of the magazine in 1842; its interest peaked in 1859, and declined at the end of the 1860s. The choice for the period 1842–1872 can be further substantiated by secondary sources. Several historians have argued that the specific role of British publications in the formation of an Australian imagined community was altered by the completion of the submarine telegraph cable that linked Australia to the rest of the world in 1872. According to Potter, the advent of ‘telegraphic news’ fundamentally altered the ‘(...) the spatial relationship between the core and periphery’, changing the way in which colonial imagined communities were formed in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

*Australian Readers of the ILN*

The size and impact of the Australian press around the mid-nineteenth century should not be underestimated. The booming colonies boasted newspapers with large circulations and a flourishing local press. In 1867 several Australian newspapers reprinted an article of *The New York Times* that described the ‘press in the Antipodes’:

The daily papers of Melbourne and Sydney rival those of London and New York in size and appearance, (...) and though the topics generally discussed in their columns possess
local interest only, yet it is the interest of a country that is rapidly increasing in wealth, population and international importance.32

In 1854 *The Argus*, published in Melbourne, and *The Sydney Morning Herald* enjoyed circulations of respectively 15,000 and 6620 copies a day.33 The editors of *The Argus* subtly pointed out that the total circulation of all the London morning papers ‘exclusive of *The Times* and *The Advertiser*’ only amounted to 12,832 copies.34 It is interesting to note that the large Australian dailies in both Melbourne and Sydney started to publish their own illustrated newspapers in the late 1860s.35

What was the role of British newspapers and magazines in this rich media landscape? In *A History of the Book in Australia* (2001), Martyn Lyons points to the importance of British book, newspaper, and periodical publishers for the Australian market.36 Putnis similarly describes the Australian imagined community as strongly related to the British one. What did this actually entail? First, Australian newspapers were dependent on the British press in a very direct way: almost all the newspapers reprinted articles of British publications on a large scale. As I have shown above, many articles of the *ILN* were republished in their entirety by Australian publications. Secondly, the Australian imagined community was related to the English one in that the Australian press focused strongly on British news. In 1865 *The Mercury* gave a vivid description of this relational nature:

On the arrival of the news from England the colonial dailies issue their ‘Extraordinaries’ with the liveliest completion and spirit. (…) As cool showers in parched deserts are these English mails to the resident in Australia. How thirstily is news taken in, how
fresh and pleasant seem the erst-sterile pages of the papers for many days to comel
(…) This treatment of imperial questions is sometimes carried even to an absurd
length. The piles of English papers bring down the parliamentary intelligence to the
night—say—before a division on which the fate of a government hangs. Now, as the
mail takes two months coming out, every one in the colonies knows that the whole
thing has long been settled. (…) After all, this is the greatest trial, which the
thorough-bred Londoner, who has long been used to his Times at breakfast, has to
endure. He seems two months out of the world—sixty days beyond civilization—eight
weeks beyond history.37

Although definitively biased by the ‘thoroughbred’ London character of the author, the
passage makes clear that British publications did not enable a form of mediated contact,
as Anderson has it, between readers in the metropolis and Australia. Subscribers to The
Times in Australia read the same articles as those in London, which meant that they
were influenced by the same imperial discourse in their respective contexts. However,
the lack of simultaneity between the two ‘readings’ of the publication resulted in the
fact that the two groups were not part of the same imagined community.

In 1863 The Age published an overview of newspapers and magazines that were
imported from Britain. In 1851 around 40,400 newspapers and magazines reached the Aus-
tralian colonies, while in 1862 this number had risen spectacularly to the amount of
1,330,000. However, newspapers and magazines not only flowed from Britain to the colo-
nies. According to the article, the number of colonial publications that were dispatched
from Australia to Britain climbed from 41,537 in 1851 to 650,000 in 1862. The author of the article was also able to ascertain the specific number of copies received by the book and newspaper trade in Melbourne in the first four months of 1863. From the 95,000 copies of different publications received in each, mostly bi-monthly mail for the whole of Australia, Melbourne dealers imported 24,000–25,000 copies. The ILN was—with 4300 copies—the most widely sold publication. According to the article, other popular titles included The Home News (3600 copies), Punch (2000 copies), and Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper (1200 copies). Although The Times is often thought to be very influential, the Melbourne trade only received 350 copies of the famous newspaper.

From the advertisement sections of Australian newspapers it becomes clear that Melbourne was not the only Australian city that received large numbers of copies of the ILN. Two Sydney-based dealers, W. R. Piddington and Waugh & Cox, regularly placed advertisements that proudly stated the number of copies of the ILN they had received: ‘Waugh and Cox have the pleasure to announce the receipt of One Thousand Copies of the above popular newspaper.’

Companies like that of Piddington were especially important for the dissemination of the ILN throughout the Australian colonies. Trove provides us with new opportunities to reconstruct their distribution networks. For example, during the 1850s, Piddington not only advertised the sale of the ILN in The Sydney Morning Herald—the major newspaper of the town where his company was based—but also placed almost identical advertisements in several of the provincial newspapers of New South Wales. However, we can

FIGURE 6
Advertisements for the ILN in four major Australian newspapers, 1842–1872
also find his advertisements in newspapers from Melbourne and Brisbane, located in Victoria and Queensland, respectively. A quick search in PaperPast, the digital newspaper archive of New Zealand, reveals that Piddington also offered the ILN in Auckland.

Importers, like Piddington, tried to cater to the specific needs of the colonial market by sending multiple issues of the ILN stitched together to subscribers in the more remote parts of Australia. In 1853 the Sydney post office refused to continue handling these ‘packets’ as bundles of newspapers. The post office was bound by law to transmit any newspaper with a ‘newspaper-stamp’ for free, whereas books and other packets were charged according to their weight. Piddington started a large ad campaign in which he claimed that the post office did not recognize the importance of the ILN for so-called country subscribers, who lived in the interior of Australia and received it by mail. A year later Piddington and Waugh & Cox presented a petition to the Legislative Council that sought to abolish the extra charge. From the descriptions of the Legislative Council that were published in The Empire and The Sydney Morning Herald it becomes clear that the petitioners lost the argument in the end.

The heated debate that followed the dispute between the importers and the Sydney post office shows that British publications played an important role in colonial Australian life. Different newspapers either took the side of the post office or Piddington and Waugh & Cox. As The Sydney Morning Herald has it: ‘As all our contemporaries have had their say upon Mr. Piddington’s claim to have The London Illustrated News circulated through the post as a newspaper, (…), we think it right to express our opinion.’ The dispute also prompted Henry Parkes to discuss the importance of the ILN for colonial life in the Legislative Council.

Importation was not the only means by which colonists could get their hands on the ILN. Especially before the abolition of the obligatory ‘newspaper-stamp’ in 1855—a tax on all news publications that ensured free transportation via the postal service—many colonists received the magazine directly from London. This is made clear in an advertisement, which was regularly placed by the ILN in several Australian newspapers between 1845 and 1848. In this advertisement, the paper prided itself on the 70,000 readers it already had and urged colonists to subscribe directly by writing to the headquarters in London, or by contacting the colonial agent of the paper—usually the colonial paper in which the advertisement was placed. It is almost certain that this advertisement campaign targeted all the British colonies. The exact same advertisement can also be found in The Royal Gazette—the newspaper of the small island of Bermuda—and in The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Adviser, which can be accessed through the Bermudian and Singaporean digital newspaper archives.

It is plausible for us to conclude that many colonists subscribed to the ILN in this direct way, ironically enough, because of the large body of evidence showing that the magazine often did not arrive. Subscribers frequently complained that the ILN was posted to them in Britain but was lost or stolen along the way. As ‘A disappointed News-Reader’ wrote to The Australian in 1844:

(…) one day last week, however, a solitary copy [of the ILN, TS] of the date of January last, was delivered, the cover hanging to it in shreds, and the paper itself being in so rumpled and dirty a state as to afford suspicion that it had been opened and read by some party who had no claim to it (…).
These letters and advertisements show that on top of the imported copies many colonists received the *ILN* directly from London. However, it remains somewhat problematic to give an exact number of copies that reached the Australian colonies. In 1863, 18% of all 25,000 copies of different publications imported in Melbourne were copies of the *ILN*. If this percentage is used for the 95,000 newspapers that were, according to the article in *The Age*, imported into the whole of Australia, around 17,100 copies of the *ILN* reached the Australian colonies by each mail. This amounts to 8–11% of the total circulation of the publication at that time.52

The *ILN* was mainly read in the urban regions of the Australian colonies. As the article in *The Age* concerning the dissemination of the publication by the Melbourne traders has it: ‘(…) about one-half [of all the copies, TS] are sold in Melbourne, the remainder being either sent up the country, or exported to New Zealand, according to the demand’.53 The advertisements of Piddington and Waugh & Cox in Sydney seem to tell the same story. They claimed to represent 600 country subscribers in their petition to the legislative council, while they often announced that each of them received around 1000 copies of the *ILN* from London.54

It is uncertain if Australian readers of the *ILN* belonged to a specific social class. The subscription rate suggests that readers had to be relatively affluent and as a result were mostly members of the upper-middle class.55 However, there were numerous (semi-)public places were the *ILN* could be read. Mechanic’s Institutes, which were supposed to provide adult education to the working class, and free public libraries sprang up all over the Australian colonies in the 1850s.56 The many advertisements and reports of the organizing committees in Australian newspapers show that the *ILN* was an important part of all sorts of colonial ‘reading rooms’. The 24 members of the Sandy Creek Mechanic’s Institute, for example, could all enjoy ‘(…) the reading room, supplied with colonial papers, as well as the *Illustrated London News*’.57 The same was true for the visitors of the reading room of Ballarat’s Mechanics Institute—‘(…) 702 (including 32 ladies)—who were counted on 19 March 1868.58

Contemporaries often bemoaned the fact that some colonists only frequented the reading rooms to amuse themselves. The *ILN* with all its ‘embellishments’ was often mentioned in this kind of criticism. For example, in 1859 *The Argus* wrote about Melbourne’s Mechanic’s Institute:

> The facilities it offers for the acquisition of information are, no doubt, liable to abuse, and many of the frequenters of the reading-room resort to it as they would to a circulating library, for no better purpose than to devour works of fiction, and to amuse themselves with the pictures of the *Illustrated London News* and other embellished periodicals.59

Many of those subscribers who complained that the *ILN* never arrived suggest that the magazine was stolen because of its attractiveness to ‘lower classes’. In 1845 a correspondent wrote to *The Australian*:

> And it is a notorious fact, that in the public-houses of the city and suburbs, newspapers (more particularly the *Illustrated London News* and *Pictorial Times*) may be seen, either with the address torn off or with other names on them than the landlords.60
Another correspondent suspected that post office employees stole his *ILN* and *Sunday Times* and that the papers had ‘(...) been carried to the diggings [the goldfields, TS] for what I know or care’.61

However, other commentators believed that the subjects in the *ILN* were of little interest to the ‘general workman’. As a review of *The British Workman*—a new illustrated magazine for the ‘operative classes’—has it:

The *Illustrated London News* is a wonderful achievement, and is probably highly attractive to the majority of readers, still it is a work of pageantry; it is a repository of fashion—it presents the glare of wealth, and the grandeur of power. From it the poor man often turns with discontent. The excluded classes feel that it [the *ILN*, TS] belongs to a world, which scarcely appertains to them; it is ever a contrast to their condition.62

What kind of illustrations did appeal to the lower classes? *The Empire* gave a clear answer in its review of *The British Workman*: ‘(...) the reformation of the drunkard, the supply of agreeable and simple mental aliment, ( ...), the narration of sad cases, and cheering ones, occurring among them, with a view to awaken every noble emotion and desire’.63 The narrative is obvious: the lower classes should be reformed by uplifting illustrations and not distracted by the pictorial representations of a world they did not, and more importantly should not, belong to. The messages in the Australian press about the stealing of the *ILN* show that the ‘lower classes’ themselves did not agree with the condescending reviewer of *The Empire*.

**Reading the ILN in Australia**

Why did the *ILN* enjoy such an enormous popularity in the Australian colonies? Of course, this has to do with the publication itself, mainly its innovative combination of text and images. In relation to this, Peter Dowling notes in his article ‘Destined Not to Survive’ (1995) that the *ILN* held a virtual monopoly on pictorial journalism in Australia in the 1840s and 1850s. In this period, many Australian illustrated newspapers were unsuccessful because they lacked proper start-up capital, knowledge of ‘consumer dynamics’ and the necessary tools for production.64 However, there are two other specific reasons for the popularity of the *ILN* in the Australian context. On its pages, first-generation immigrants could not only see the land where they were born; they could also see how people in the mother country saw them. The *ILN* provided a visual link between Britain and the colony, but this link was—at least for the colonists—far from a one-way street.

The *ILN* regularly referred to its many readers in the colonies. The magazine underlined the advantages of a large colonial readership for both the colonies and the ‘mother country’; it provided a visual link between both.65 The *ILN* presented itself as a medicine against homesickness and a strong reminder of British civilization:

It will be the constant study of its proprietors, (...) to make the *Illustrated London News* a welcome guest in every family in the realm, and the most dearly prized of all newspapers in those remote dependencies and possessions where Englishmen are building up new Englands, and spreading the name and race, the literature, language, laws, manners, religion, and power of the old country.66
The argument that the *ILN* reminded colonists of British civilization was often mirrored in the Australian press. In 1867 an anonymous author, discussing co-operative farming in *The Queenslander*, gave the following advice to future immigrants:

I cannot do better, in this place—when upon the subject of civilization—than disburden my mind of a piece of advice to co-operators that I feel to be of paramount importance. (...) Receive into your home, especially, two prints which I hold to be the most pure and delightful of all popular publications—viz., *Harper’s Weekly* and the *Illustrated London News*. Illuminate your dwellings with them.67

The author further stated that a subscription to the two publications would give the farmer and his children something to look forward to in the ‘(...) monotony of a comparatively isolated life’.68 Although this article is the only one that mentions the *ILN* and *Harper’s Weekly*—an American illustrated newspaper—together, it might suggest that some colonists felt themselves to be part of a wider English-speaking world that was not limited by the borders of the British Empire. Furthermore, the choice to receive and recommend both publications is interesting, because, in the mid-1860s *Harper’s Weekly* copied most of its illustrations from the *ILN*.69

The Australian press was mainly concerned by how the world, and especially Britain, saw the colony through the eyes of the *ILN*. Already in 1846 *The Launceston Examiner* wrote: ‘The *Illustrated London News* has an immense circulation and a proportionate influence.’70 Therefore it was vital that ‘(...) some of our amateur or professional artists would furnish the *London News* with their sketches’.71 In 1862 *The Star* remarked about some illustrations of Melbourne that had appeared in a recent issue of the *ILN*: ‘No one can overestimate the value of such a means of advertising as that which is offered by an attractive picture in a newspaper with so wide a circulation as the *Illustrated London News*.’72

Authors in the Australian press often stressed that it was of seminal importance that the colonies were kept in the British public eye. The colonists were, or at least were thought to be, greatly dependent on the home country for their prosperity. In 1861 ‘F.C.’, a self-described businessman, proposed in *The Argus* that the colonists should even pay the *ILN* to publish information about the wages of day-labourers in Australia: immigration was, after all, the ‘only hope for the colony’:

By these means we should always appear before the world, and not be forgotten, as I fear we are, by our great distance from the mother country. (...) We want to appear on the breakfast-table every morning, and be discussed every evening in the coffee-house, the ale-house, and at the cottager’s fireside.73

The same belief in the influence of the *ILN* can be felt in a letter of ‘W. N. N.’ to *The Sydney Morning Herald* in which he described how ‘an American friend’ was planning to send the *ILN* a photograph of the empty spot in Sydney where a statue in honor of the deceased Prince Albert was supposed to have been erected. ‘W. N. N.’ feared that this photograph, if it were to be engraved, would show the disloyalty of Australians to their Queen and mother country.74

Colonists were not always content with the way in which they were portrayed in the *ILN*. The article ‘More Absurdities about Australia’ in *The Moreton Bay Courier* described how the illustrations of the article ‘Kangaroo Hunting in Australia’ in the *ILN* had made a mockery of the actual practice.75 In 1869 the special Christmas issue of the *ILN*, especially
the part that gave a brief description of ‘the current state of our colonial possessions’, was also criticized. According to The Queenslander these kinds of descriptions, despite all the ‘misinformation about Australia’ that they spread, at least showed the ‘(…) opinion of the reading public of the old country and the direction in which it was being “educated”’.76

Conclusion

Between 1842 and 1872 the ILN was the most widely read British publication in the Australian colonies. Although relatively expensive, it can be argued that not only the ‘respectable families’ of the colony, as Henry Parkes put it, but also the lower social strata, would have regularly seen its illustrations and read its texts. This popularity stemmed from the double visual link that the magazine provided between the colonies and the mother country. First-generation immigrants could see the country that they had left and at the same time they could also see how the mother country saw them. The image of Australia in Britain was thought to be of vital importance for the prosperity of the colony and the ILN was one of the most effective tools with which this image could be managed.

This case study of the reception and distribution of the ILN in Australia shows that it not only contributed to a British imagined community but also to several colonial ones. Therefore, it empirically supports the theoretical objections made in this article against research that draws conclusions about the production of identity by solely looking at the nature of visual and textual representation. Similar research in other colonial contexts, although not yet possible because of the lack of digital archives, would undoubtedly further substantiate and complicate this picture.

Nowadays, cutting-edge research using digital newspaper archives often lets the software decide what we want to know, by searching for ‘patterns’ in huge data sets and thereby allowing technology to determine our research agenda. This kind of research certainly offers exciting opportunities, but at the same time researchers should not relinquish their agency over historical sources. This article has demonstrated that digital newspaper archives enable historians to find the proverbial ‘missing pieces’ of many long-standing historical puzzles. The problem of historical readership will hopefully be only one of them.

Disclosure Statement

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Notes

1. These figures are based on ‘notices to advertisers’ in the Illustrated London News, which probably means that they, especially after the abolition of the newspaper stamp in 1855 are somewhat inflated. Therefore, they should be used as an approximation of the true circulation. The last figure that Richard Altick gives in his seminal The English Common Reader is 123,000 copies in 1853. 1842. “To Advertisers,” Illustrated London News, September 17; 1855. “The Illustrated London News,” Illustrated London News, August 11; 1857. “To the Trade,” Illustrated London News, November 28; Altick, The English Common Reader, 394.
15. Ibid., 211.
27. Putnis argues that these newspapers were the most influential in the Australian colonies in the period of this research. Putnis, “Reuters in Australia,” 69.
28. The majority of clippings from the *ILN* can be filtered from the results in *Trove* by searching with the same keywords and with the condition that the word ‘from’ should be in either the title or in the 14 lines below the title. Most other digital newspaper archives, such as the British Newspaper Archive, do not offer this useful option. See Beals, “Musings on a Multi-modal Analysis of Scissors-and-Paste Journalism (Part 1),” accessed February 12, 2016,

Nicholson, “You Kick the Bucket; We Do the Rest!,” 277–8.

29. See Briggs and Burke, A Social History of the Media, 110; Putnis, “Reuters in Australia,” 68.


31. See also Putnis, “Reuters in Australia,” 69.


36. Lyons, “Reading Models and Reading Communities,” 236.


39. Ibid.


Postal Dispute as to “The Illustrated London News.”” The Maitland Mercury and the Hunter River General Adviser, November 5.

52. It is hard to place a number on the total circulation of the ILN. The special issue about the wedding of the Prince of Wales in 1863 sold 300,000 copies, but it is unlikely that this huge amount was a regular occurrence. The last regular circulation numbers mentioned by Richard Altick are from 1853 (123,000). I place the regular circulation of the Illustrated News around 150,000–200,000 copies, which is an educated guess. Altick, The English Common Reader, 394.
54. This means that 1400 copies of the Illustrated London News were sold in Sydney.
57. 1868. “Country Correspondence: Sandy Creek,” South Australian Register, June 12.
64. Dowling, “Destined Not to Survive,” 87–90.
68. Ibid.
69. The second chapter of my thesis, concerning the transnational trade in illustrations of the news, will substantiate this claim. The copying of illustrations from the ILN by Harper’s Weekly was covered in the British press. See, for example, 1870. “Illustrated Newspapers,” The Gentleman’s Magazine, new series vol. IV, 452–70.
71. Ibid.
73. Ibid.

Bibliography


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