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Citation: Lonsdale, S. (2023). Patriotic Hens, Tomato Turbans and Mock Fish: The Daily Mail Food Bureau, Rationing and National Identity During the First World War. In: Fakazis, E. & Fursich, E. (Eds.), *The Political Relevance of Food Media: Beyond Reviews and Recipes*. (pp. 183-198). London: Routledge. ISBN 9781032250502

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**Patriotic Hens, Tomato Turbans and Mock Fish: The *Daily Mail* Food Bureau,
Rationing and National Identity During the First World War**

Sarah Lonsdale

Introduction

On 4 March 1918, as Britain wearily faced a fourth year of the Great War, the country's most popular morning newspaper introduced a new service to readers: the *Daily Mail* Food Bureau. In a prominent article at the top of page five headlined "Food Problems," the paper promised that during this time "when food supplies are restricted," the Bureau would help the "housewife, having only the vague idea of the nutritive values of various foods" to feed her family a "balanced" and "sufficient" diet in the present "*Food Battle*." These last two words were italicised to emphasise how war was now being fought on the Home Front as well as in the trenches of France, inviting the housewives of Britain to see themselves as soldiers engaged in what the paper called a do-or-die "Fight to a Finish." Readers were asked to write into the *Daily Mail* offices at Carmelite House with questions which would either be answered in the paper, or through the post. The Bureau would also give public lantern lectures on new sources of food to replace the staples that were now being rationed.

Food controls had gradually been introduced from the earliest days of the war – the sugar trade had effectively been brought under government control on 7 August 1914; official rationing, through coupons, of meat, fat, sugar, jam and tea began 25 February 1918 (Oddy 2003, 71). Rationing would continue for some foodstuffs right through until the end of 1920, with sugar being the last item to come off the ration in November 1920. Throughout the war years, rising prices, food scarcity, and the regular sinkings of food-importing merchant ships by German submarines had combined to move issues of food to the center of people's

concerns. As an illustration of how desperate for advice people were, the *Daily Mail* reported, less than a year after it was established, that the Bureau had sent out 252,977 letters to readers requesting recipes for dishes without meat, fat or sugar (“Do you need the help of the Food Bureau?” *Daily Mail* 7 February 1919, 7). By the time the Bureau was closed in 1920, the number of letters answered was “in the millions” (Peel 1933, 222).

This represents an unprecedented service from a newspaper to its readers, illustrating a newspaper’s role, in addition to providing news, in helping its readers navigate, as Eide and Knight put it, “the problems of everyday life” (Eide and Knight 1999), even in the early years of mass print journalism. The Bureau was so successful that Dorothy Peel, the *Daily Mail*’s women’s editor who wrote the wartime recipes, turned much of the advice into a book, *Daily Mail War Recipes*, published in late 1918. The Food Bureau was not the only example of the *Daily Mail*’s ‘service journalism’ to its readers on the critical issue of food. We will see that the subject moved gradually from the women’s pages to the news and editorial pages as the war continued. Coverage did not only focus on the government’s evolving food policy, food prices and the sinking of merchant ships, subjects one would expect to be covered in a newspaper. As scarcity continued and rationing loomed, the paper published increasing numbers of practical articles on how to find alternative food sources and recipes that made use of limited ingredients as the domestic sphere became an increasingly urgent focus of public discourse.

While it has been established that food journalism, especially in advanced societies, is often designated as ‘lifestyle journalism’ and relegated to the ‘soft’ areas of newspaper features pages and magazine supplements (Duffy and Ashley 2012; Kristensen and Fromm 2013), this general pattern is disrupted during times of national crisis especially when food is scarce or rationed (Bentley 2001). In addition, scholars have established that lifestyle journalism can have a “democratic and even empowering potential” for readers and audiences

(Fursich 2013, 12; Costera Meijer 2001). Much of the journalism on food published in the *Daily Mail* and other newspapers during the First World War was undoubtedly a kind of lifestyle journalism in that it was about consumption, commodities, and recipes, and it was focused on the domestic realm. This chapter will argue that as the war progressed, and the active participation of civilians was required to avert mass starvation, the *Daily Mail's* food coverage constructed an image of a very different reader than the “clients and consumers” (Hanusch and Hanitzsch 2013, 944) of conventional lifestyle journalism. Crucially, while still focused on consumption, it was all about consuming *less*, rather than more, and because the country was engaged in an existential struggle, it addressed readers much more as public citizens “concerned with the social and political issues of the day” than individual, passive consumers (Hanusch and Hanitzsch 2013, 944; Costera Meijer 2001, 194).

Food and national identity

Under the peculiar circumstances of the First World War, the *Daily Mail's* food coverage, in its news articles, editorials, and publication of letters to the editor, became central in the crafting of a national wartime identity for its readers. Not only did coverage of food as a topic break out of the fledgling women's pages and become one of the most important topics in the paper, but both the newspaper and its readers collaborated in using the issue of food as a means of crafting the character of the ideal citizen: patriotic, frugal, resourceful and selfless; the ideal citizen in wartime to which all readers could aspire.

Scholars have shown how food plays a vital role “in the formation of national identity” through national dishes such as, in the case of Britain, roast beef and fish and chips (Ashley et al 2004, 80-81). Peter Scholliers has demonstrated food's central role “in the representation and identity of a person” and how this process of identification “operates through various media: the individual, a close and a distance group of declared peers” as well as “remote

mediators” including journalists and scientists (Scholliers 2001, 304). In certain circumstances, Scholliers argues that food operates in the process of identification of an entire nation, as the group shares and reinforces common characteristics of an ideal in a “never-ending process of construction” (Scholliers 2001, 6). This process plays out in and through national media, historically books and pamphlets and later mass market newspapers that enabled people “to relate themselves to others in profoundly new ways,” the “imagined community” bound together through the knowledge that one shares the same values (Anderson 1983, 32).

Food can, however, both bind a nation together and divide it. One way food can accentuate differences within nations is by serving as markers of social status and class. Bourdieu initially demonstrated how class differences – and rivalries – can be accentuated through different foods, the working classes eating carbohydrate- and calorie-rich staples such as bread, bacon and potatoes; the bourgeoisie eating exotic, imported and expensive luxuries (Bourdieu 1984; Ashley et al 2004, 59-70). The specific circumstances of the First World War, however, with the limited range of foodstuffs available to an entire nation, and rationing theoretically restricting the middle- and upper classes to the same quantities of food as the working classes, meant that the national diet was more homogenous than it had been for decades, minimising those class differences and further binding the nation together. Dorothy Peel, Household Department editor at the *Queen* newspaper, and later, women’s page editor of the *Daily Mail* explained:

In newspapers, in which descriptions of dishes made of foie gras and truffles, soles and lobsters and unlimited quantities of cream, eggs and butter used to appear, we find recipes for food such as ‘cheap brown soup’ and a concoction called ‘Crowdie’, made of the liquid in which mutton had been boiled, onions, oatmeal, salt and pepper. (Peel 1929, 54)

In other words, the middle classes' diets began to look much the same as the diets of the working classes. The government, very alert to working and lower-middle class concerns that while they went without, the rich would always somehow get round shortages, made great efforts to maintain imports of tinned fruit, a staple more readily affordable and available than fresh fruit. Its propaganda efforts, through the Ministry of Information, also sought to reassure citizens that everyone was in the war effort together (Hockenhull 2015, 581-582).

The apparent eradication of difference and, through newspapers, the public construction of the ideal citizen through its approach to food, would help bind the nation together in an unprecedented moment of threat and jeopardy. Food writers constructed these changes as a further source of anxiety for middle class housewives with the *Daily Mail's* new Food Bureau stepping in to provide comfort to these women, reassuring them of their continued status, and advising them on how to appropriately manage their kitchens. Through the *Daily Mail's* leading articles particularly, women were sent the message that their patriotic behaviour in feeding their families frugally and helping in food cultivation might earn them "cultural citizenship," and thus they might be deemed worthy of full citizenship, with attendant voting rights that had so far eluded them.

A nation tightens its belt

After war was declared in August 1914, the prices of staples rose immediately, due to panic buying and hoarding, and the War Office requisitioning vast quantities of meat and flour for the army (Oddy 2003, 74). The prices of bacon, sugar and bread – the working-class staples – all rose, with sugar prices increasing by 80 percent in the first week of the war, although they decreased a few weeks later. The government's budget of 1915 raised taxes on tea, coffee, sugar and cocoa, effectively restricting consumption of all these goods (Oddy 2003, 74). Real scarcity began after the poor harvest of 1916, which led to the Corn

Production Act of 1917 to stimulate the ploughing up of lower grade agricultural land and grassland (Coller 1925, 9-13). Voluntary rationing, which included one meatless day a week, dubbed 'National Lent,' was introduced in February 1917, and two months later the government passed a Food Hoarding Order in April 1917, giving government agents powers to enter and search private homes for stocks of food. Beginning in 1917, sporadic food riots targeted grocers, shopkeepers, bakers and butchers, and starvation began to pose a serious threat to the poorer classes (Van Emden and Humphries 2003, 215-216). Official rationing began in February 1918, with first sugar, then meat, butter, cheese and margarine.

Most British newspapers were enthusiastic supporters of the war, and they would later be held to account for glossing over or trivialising British losses on the battlefield and fabricating numerous stories of German atrocities to such an extent that for many years the reputation of the press was held in very low esteem (Knightley 2000, 83-120). Reader scepticism over newspaper coverage of the progress of the war was widespread and summed up in Vera Brittain's famous memoir of the war, *Testament of Youth* (1933). Brittain wrote, "As usual the Press had given no hint of that tragedy's dimensions, and it was only through the long casualty lists, and the persistent demoralising rumours ... that the world was gradually coming to realise something of what the engagement had been" (Brittain 2009, 110, emphasis added). Newspaper mendacities became a popular theme in contemporary wartime novels and, particularly, in the 'War poetry' of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen, and the "lying journalist" was soon an established stereotype in popular culture (Lonsdale 2016, 47-71). Yet in the same papers, articles on British 'victories' were joined by the publication of wartime recipes, food-related tips for nursing convalescent soldiers, and suggestions for unusual sources for food. Wartime diaries and letters show that people were very worried about food scarcity, and newspapers, reflecting their readers' concerns, expanded their food and gardening coverage. Even the *Times* published articles, ration recipes and readers' letters

on subjects such as alternative sources of fish, using potatoes in place of flour, and hunting for wild game. In many newspapers, the first articles on gardening for food rather than flowers began to appear (Lonsdale 2015, 808-810).

The *Daily Mail*'s First World War food coverage

As food became a national obsession, the *Daily Mail* provided intense food coverage in several sections of the paper that fell into three broad categories: news and feature articles written by journalists and specialist contributors, commentary provided by news leaders (the editor's 'voice'), and letters to the editor sent in by readers. An analysis of these three categories from 1914 to 1920 reveals a surging interest in food throughout the war years, reaching a peak in 1917 and 1918, and then declining through 1919 and 1920 as controls were gradually removed (see Table 1). At the same time, the average number of newspaper pages was reduced by half, from twelve in 1914 to six in 1918 as the country experienced a severe paper shortage. Despite this, the numbers of articles on food still increased, with the issue of food being the subject of more than 6,000 news and feature articles and 256 "news leaders" pieces in 1917 and 1918. Readers' enthusiasm for contributing their opinions on the subject also surged, with nearly 800 readers' letters on food published in the paper in 1917 and 1918. While many of the readers' letters complained about government policy, particularly sugar rationing, this mirroring of coverage between the newspaper's own content and reader contributions implies close agreement between readers and their newspaper over what issues deserved most coverage.

Year	News or feature articles	Leader	Letters to the editor	Total
1914	742	20	45	807
1915	1328	43	105	1476

1916	1400	72	153	1625
1917	2903	160	492	3555
1918	2650	96	301	3047
1919	2453	15	118	2586
1920	1647	5	89	1741

Table 1: Number of items containing the word 'food' by type of article, Daily Mail 1914-1920

News and feature articles

News and feature articles written by journalists and specialist correspondents made up by far the largest category, and the thousands of news articles and features about food published in the *Daily Mail* between 1914 and 1920 can be divided into four sub-categories: 1) political articles about food such as government policies, food prices and trade and import strategies once the German submarines began a campaign of targeting merchant ships; 2) domestic articles about food once commodities such as wheat, butter and sugar became scarce; 3) articles reporting on food shortages in enemy countries; and 4) recipes.

Political articles

Political stories dominated coverage in the first two years of the war before the effects of shortages began to be widely felt. Articles explained issues such as the Transatlantic wheat trade (“Wheat for the Allies” 4 January 1915, 8), the government’s policy of diverting food stocks to the army (“Butter for the Troops,” 14 January 1915, 3; “Patriotic Hens,” 5 January 1915, 2) and the intensification of farming to make up for a drop in imports (“Get the Utmost out of the Land” 23 May 1916, 5). As the war progressed, articles covered debates in parliament over whether rationing should be voluntary or compulsory and various attempts by the Food Controller to encourage self-sufficiency on the home front. Details of court cases

prosecuting unscrupulous victuallers watering down milk or serving spoiled meat to the troops were also regularly published, reassuring readers that unpatriotic war profiteers would be punished. In February 1918, at the very beginning of official rationing, the paper published details of illegal food hoarding by a Member of Parliament, which included 100 pounds of biscuits, 102 pounds of sugar and 34 pounds of golden syrup. The MP for West Down, William MacCaw, was fined £400 (“M.P.’s Food Hoard” 5 February 1918, 3). From early in the war, news articles and features encouraged women to see themselves as part of the effort, doing their bit through personal sacrifice and hard work. The appeal to patriotism through “doing your bit” even went as far as encouraging readers to donate eggs from their ‘patriotic hens’ to speed the convalescence of wounded soldiers by providing them with good nutrition (“Patriotic Hens” 5 January 1915, 4). A similar article inspired by the Food Controller’s comments in Parliament urging gardeners to turn their flowerbeds over to vegetable growing stated: “We can undoubtedly fight the Germans with potatoes and beans as well as with shells and bullets.” (“Food Vegetables: Gardeners’ Duty” 3 March 1915, 3).

Domestic articles

As headlines translated into real privations, the second category of coverage of domestic food issues began to dominate, with the paper regularly publishing articles on alternative sources of food that housewives could turn to in feeding their families. Women were encouraged to incorporate into their meals foods that had been used in the past but had fallen out of fashion, such as whale steaks and pilchards, as well as more outlandish alternatives, such as substituting seagulls, coots and moorhens for beef and poultry (“Roast Seagull and Other Quaint Bird Dishes” 16 February 1917, 2), and baking cakes with ground up roots of bracken ferns rather than wheat flour (“Bracken Fern Cakes” 22 February 1917, 8). These articles inspired readers to contribute letters offering their own tips and advice by the hundreds.

Food privations in enemy countries

The third category of articles, on food privations in enemy countries, quickly became a regular feature of the paper. No matter how bad things were in Britain, the articles implied, things were always worse in Germany (“Germany Day by Day: No Pancakes” 1 January 1915, 9; “Rush for Potatoes: Great Scarcity of Supplies in Berlin” 13 February 1915, 6; “German Food Riots” 19 February 1915, 6). As well as providing news from the continent, these articles helped further the process of constructing and affirming national identity by identifying the ‘other’ against which British citizens could define themselves (Schlesinger, 1987, 235). These articles consistently portrayed German troops as more susceptible to the effects of privations than British soldiers, and German civilians, through their participation in food riots, as incapable of the kind of stoic self-control, the ‘stiff upper lip’ fortitude, that was so important to British national identity and pride (Lonsdale 2016, 61).

Recipes

In 1914 and 1915, *The Daily Mail* published 33 and 37 recipes respectively. These appeared mostly in the women’s page but, in 1915, a few appeared in the letters to the editor page, having been contributed by readers. The number of recipes increased to 67 in 1917 and to 71 in 1918, before dropping back to 33 in 1919 (see Table 2).¹ In 1920, the number of recipe stories increased to 51, due to the return of a dedicated women’s page once paper shortages eased and the paper’s pagination increased. Between 1914 and 1920, only one editorial was published that contained a recipe, criticizing the quality of food served to Allied prisoners of war in German prisons, and describing the preparation of a thin soup that, the

¹ For ‘recipe’, every article under the search terms ‘recipe’ or ‘food AND prepare OR preparation’ or ‘cook’ was examined. To constitute a recipe this needed actually to give advice on how to cook or put ingredients together rather than, for example, just advice to eat gulls’ eggs or seal meat without any preparation advice. Simply skinning or removing feathers was not enough.

paper argued, was turning British and French prisoners into famished skeletons (“Fair Play for our Prisoners” 24 May 1918, 2).

Year	News or feature article	Editorial	Letter to the Editor	Total
1914	33	0	0	33
1915	31	0	6	37
1916	22	0	3	25
1917	60	0	7	67
1918	62	1	8	71
1919	33	0	0	33
1920	51	0	0	51

Table 2: Number of items that contain recipes or directions on how to prepare food, by type of article, Daily Mail 1914-1920

In early 1914, before the war started, recipes on the women’s page featured luxury or exotic ingredients and were addressed to a housewife anxious to provide delicacies and a tasty range of meals for her family. In 1914, less than 20 years after the paper’s launch, it was still trying to shake off the then Prime Minister’s damning epithet that it was “written by office boys for office boys,” and made great efforts to attract middle class housewives (Griffiths 2006, 131).

In its women’s page, featuring Paris fashions and luxury recipes, the paper constructed a modern bourgeois identity through careful positioning of the context, ideology and practice of eating (Rich 2011). Recipes included richly exotic fruit dishes such as banana omelette made with cream and eggs; banana salad made with chopped nuts, lettuce and parsley (27 January 1914, 9); and “Grapefruit salad” made with Maraschino cherries, pineapple, grapefruit and Cornish clotted cream (20 February 1914, 11). The paper began

publishing recipes for the war-time household in early 1915 initially as advice to mothers and wives on how to feed convalescents who had been injured in the fighting (“Milk puddings for convalescents” 15 January 1915, 9). As food rose in cost and began to be scarce, the women’s page (which continued to be published until the autumn of 1917) began publishing recipes for “War-Time Meals” as well as alternatives to day-to-day foods once scarcity kicked in. The paper gave advice on making “Herb Drinks” as a substitute for tea (27 January 1916, 9), suggesting using lime-flower, borage, orange flower or mint as the government imposed maximum household allowances of a quarter of a pound per person per week for tea. Another recipe, this one for “Mock Fish” gave complicated directions for cooking up softened, mashed and baked salsify (a European edible plant in the daisy family) that contained no fish at all yet required lengthy preparation, to be served in porcelain shells (February 26 1916, 7). Still in 1916 the emphasis of these recipes was on luxury and keeping up standards despite a certain amount of privation. Gradually recipes focused much more on important basics such as “Nut Bread” (26 September 1916, 7) and “Sugarless Jam” (6 September 1916, 7). Potatoes, one of the few sources of carbohydrate that were still plentiful, were often the basis for many recipes (“Potato cakes for breakfast” and “Potatoes with Cheese” 7 July 1917, 7; “Gnocchi of Potatoes” 4 February 1916, 9). In 1918, just as rationing was introduced, a rather desperate “Fish from the Rivers” recipe was published, trying to make river fish, usually rejected in favour of sea fish, sound palatable (“Fish from the Rivers” 2 March 1918, 2).

All these recipes had hitherto been written anonymously but, on 6 February 1918, a new series of ration recipes titled “Food Chat” appeared with the by-line “By a Housewife.” The “Food Chat” column was a mixture of news about food, such as what the Americans were eating and the nutritional value of “whale beef,” combined with recipes such as “A Cheap Marmalade Recipe” made substituting half the usual orange quantity with lemons (14

February 1918, 4). Three weeks later, on 28 February, the author of “Food Chat” was named as Mrs. C. S. Peel, editor of the household department at *The Queen* newspaper, and Ministry of Food lecturer (Peel 1933, 160, 182, 218). Peel, who had been hired by the Ministry of Food during the government’s Food Economy Campaign to conduct lecture tours around the country explaining to housewives how to conserve precious food resources, was initially disinclined to accept *Daily Mail* proprietor Lord Northcliffe’s invitation to head up the *Daily Mail* Food Bureau. In her memoir she wrote, “I thought I would ask such terms as would not be accepted, so suggested a salary of £1,000 a year and stipulated that I must be allowed to retain the Editorship of the Household Department of *The Queen*” (Peel 1933, 220). Northcliffe accepted and even bettered her terms, indicating how important the issue of food was to the paper and its readers, and also how important it was to the paper’s image that the editor of the Household Department of *The Queen*, a paper for elite women, worked on the *Daily Mail* staff.

When the Bureau was announced in the *Daily Mail* on 4 March, the paper told its readers that the “new service” would be directed by Dr. J. Campbell, “the scientific adviser and rationing expert at the Ministry of Food.” A man’s reassuringly scientific and expert voice, presumably, was assumed to have greater authority with readers than that of a woman. All the recipes, however, were written by Dorothy Peel. Peel would later write that she was forever being side-lined at the paper, and that women’s voices and experiences were belittled or ignored. She wrote,

It irked me not to be allowed to earn my salary . . . I wished to be treated as a person doing a job. . . I felt a trifle amused that all these men who were engaged in producing a paper, the success of which depended on the good will of women – should think the opinion of a woman of so little importance (Peel 1933, 229).

The purpose of the “Food Bureau” was to provide a service to readers and by so doing to bolster the *Daily Mail*’s image as a paper for the middle classes, even as the recipes and ingredients increasingly resembled working-class fare. The upmarket department store Harrods had first introduced its own “Harrods Food Bureau” in the summer of 1917 as voluntary rationing became adopted as *de facto* by most people (“Harrods Food Bureau” display advertisement, *Daily Mail* 30 August 1917, 1). The Harrods Food Bureau worked to ensure equitable distribution of scarce foodstuffs, organize public lectures for customers on how to make rations stretch, and provide customers with the latest advice from the Food Controller. By mimicking the features of the Harrods Food Bureau, the *Daily Mail* cast itself both as indispensable to its readers and as a trusted source of information for the middle classes.

The recipes Peel wrote for the newspaper and later collected in the *Daily Mail War Recipes* book, published in 1918 by Constable and Co. for one shilling and sixpence, make strange reading today. “Savoury Roast,” for example, was a loaf made from eight ounces of butter beans, eight ounces of rice, onions, tomatoes and just one ounce of minced meat (Peel 1918, 35). Housewives were urged to embellish the roast’s presentation to make up for the meager amount of meat and fat. Similarly, another recipe for “Tomato Turban” consisted simply of chopped tomatoes, breadcrumbs and cornflour mixed together and baked in a ring mould (Peel 1918, 51). Readers were also given advice on how to make cheese from soured milk, how to keep goats, how to make a hay box oven which cooked food through insulation, and how to make syrup sugar from sugar beet. The front cover of the book showed a neat housewife wearing an apron standing in her kitchen, poring carefully over a recipe book titled *Daily Mail*, thus reinforcing the vital help the paper was offering women on the Home Front.

Leaders

The frequency of leaders about food followed the same pattern as other types of articles, peaking in 1917 and 1918 before dropping back after the end of the war. Being the official ‘voice’ of the *Daily Mail*, these leaders for the most part discussed the main political news of the day such as rationing (“The Growing Bread Shortage” 21 April 1917, 4), the sinking of British merchant ships (“What is Wrong” 6 November 1916: 4), food pricing policy (“Parliament and the Rise in Prices” 11 February 1915, 4), and the blockading of German food supplies (“The Sham Blockade” 18 January 1916, 4). Occasionally leaders promoted the paper’s own initiatives, such as offering a £1,000 prize to champion vegetable growers (“1,000 Vegetable Prizes” 4 March 1915, 4) and calling for households to engage in communal pig keeping (“Pigs not Words” 28 February 1918, 2). The leaders also suggested ways in which women could earn social and cultural citizenship even if they still did not have voting rights (Jensen 2019). Calls for women to join the Land Corps (“A Women’s Corps for the Land” 19 January 1917, 4) to help the fight with “food munitions as well as war munitions” (“Sow Now” 2 April 1915, 4) and learn how to cook with inferior cuts of meat (“Learn to Cook” 8 January 1917, 2) all showed women ways they could earn their stripes on the home front. Finally, leaders directed readers’ attention to people who broke the rules, hoarders and profiteers in particular, and the consequences they faced. On the whole, the paper’s leaders were supportive of government food policy; the major exceptions were in what its editorial board saw as the Navy’s failings in protecting merchant shipping and enforcing blockades of Germany, and the belated legislation to make rationing compulsory rather than voluntary. In many of these critical leaders, the editorial often referred to its readers as also being concerned, such as “as letters in our columns show” (“The Growing Bread Shortage” 21 April 1917, 4), thus reinforcing a positive relationship between readers and paper over matters of national importance.

Letters to the editor

As we have seen, the numbers of letters to the editor published in the *Daily Mail* on the subject of food increased steadily through the war years, reaching a peak in 1917 and 1918, and then gradually decreasing as rationing and scarcity eased. The last foods to come off the ration were sugar in November 1920, butter in May 1920 and meat in December 1919 (Oddy 2003, 87). A closer examination of these letters shows readers' concerns can be broadly grouped into four key themes: 1) concern over food waste, 2) desire to demonstrate their patriotism and frugality, 3) helpful hints to share with other readers, and 4) dissatisfaction with government food policy.

The first theme, concern over waste, revealed itself in the early months of the war. For example, letters often suggested that too many parts of vegetables were being thrown away through peeling and aggressive topping and tailing ("Food Waste" 11 February 1915, 4) or that processed white flour should be replaced with wholemeal flour, which used more of the wheat husk ("Standard Bread Tributes" 28 January 1915, 4). The baking of 'Standard Bread' made with wholemeal flour had been a long-running *Daily Mail* campaign pre-dating the war, and the paper enthusiastically promoted it beginning in January 1915, quoting experts who claimed this practice would markedly increase the bread supply. Readers responded to the paper's campaign, clearly wanting to show themselves as part of a patriotic and frugal "in-group" of which the paper was a standard bearer.

The theme of frugality and patriotism revealed itself not only in letters informing other readers how to grow more and eat less, but also castigating indulgent cake-eating middle class women, and in one extraordinary exchange, non-smokers who apparently ate more than smokers ("The Value of Thrift" 23 January 1915, 4; "The Cake Habit" 17 March 1916, 4 and "Are Non-smokers Big Eaters?" 10 May 1917, 4). Letters complaining about government policy were careful not to object to rationing in itself, which was seen as being unpatriotic, but about specific and apparently ineffective kinds of rationing. Jam makers,

particularly, complained that sugar rationing resulted in tons of usable fruit going to waste because it couldn't be preserved (a long running series of correspondence under the heading "No Sugar for Jam" ran through early 1918). Similarly, pig keepers complained that rationing decreased the amount of available food scraps, which led to thinner pigs that could not provide enough meat in the winter ("Pigs and Officials" 24 July 1918, 2; and "More Pig-Keepers Needed" 19 January 1918, 3).

By far the most numerous letters to the editor shared helpful tips with other readers, through recipes for unusual foods, or tips as to where to find alternative sources of food ("Frozen Whale for Food" 12 February 1915, 4; "Plentiful Whortleberries" 26 July 1914, 4; "The nutritious carrot" 20 April 1917, 4; and under a heading of "55 Ships Sunk Last Week," a reader recipe for steamed batter pudding using flaked maize rather than flour, 28 April 1917, 2). Other letters suggest that readers were trying to outdo each other by offering quite outlandish proposals, indicating extreme levels of desperation among British households, particularly in the last two years of the war. One correspondent lauded the taste of young seal flesh as being "as delicate as sucking (sic) pig" ("Seal Flesh as Food" 15 February 1918, 2); another argued that cormorant meat was no different to dark game-bird meat ("Roast Seagull" 19 February 1917, 2); and a third praised sparrow meat in puddings, and advised how to trap and pluck them ("Sparrows as Food" 10 February 1917, 2). These letters revealed readers wanting to show themselves as helpful, resourceful, and "doing their bit" from the home front, which was important to the crafting of national identity.

There is a performative nature to many of these letters, some seeking to shock or provoke, others spotlighting the letter writer as a source of folkloric or age-old knowledge. A letter writer extolling the virtues of gulls' eggs, for example, told readers how as a boy he would climb cliffs to hunt for them ("Gulls' Eggs as Food" 8 February 1917, 4); the writer praising seal made sure to tell readers that he had eaten it himself and could vouch for its

flavour. This latter letter provoked a response from Herbert Ponting, a celebrity of the time, famous for being the photographer who had accompanied Captain Robert Scott on his expedition to the South Pole 1910-1912. Ponting advised readers on how to catch, skin and cook seals (“Seal Flesh Dishes” 25 February 1918, 2).

This response to a letter by another letter writer was common practice, revealing a community of readers and writers talking to each other often without reference to any newspaper content outside the letters’ column: a kind of early 20th century media “echo chamber” that we see today with social media, boosting and reinforcing the views of like-minded people (Boulianne et al. 2020). It has been argued that in the contemporary world of social media “people do not live, any longer *with* the media – but increasingly *in* the media,” with anyone able to share and express their lifestyles through their Instagram, Twitter, or TikTok accounts (Hanusch and Hanitsch 2013, 946). These letters from 100 years ago, in the days before social media, and even before public television and radio, reveal efforts by some readers to occupy a position ‘in’ rather than ‘with’ the media and to become part of a newspaper’s war effort. This was achieved by a number of means: either the shocking or performative content of letters, as has been shown above, or by letter-writers aligning themselves to newspaper campaigns such as the one for ‘Standard Bread.’ Another *Daily Mail* campaign, advocating for the appointment of a Director of Pig Production, was also enthusiastically supported by letter writers: “Sir: some months ago you began a campaign in favour of a larger production of pigs in this country. You were so far successful that you compelled the government to appoint a Director of Pig Production...” (“Pigs and Officials” 24 July 1918, 2). None of the letters on the subject of food actually contradicted the *Daily Mail*’s editorial position, and so a reader contributing positively to the paper’s editorial line could be confident of having their letter published and thus read by millions of people.

A third way that letterwriters lived ‘in’ the media was similar to social media practices today: by carefully crafting an anonymous persona that conferred authority to the contributor. For example in the long-running “No Sugar for Jam” debate that ran in the letters pages in early 1918 prior to official rationing, one correspondent, writing about the right time to pick and preserve fruit, signed their letter “An Old Woman of Kent” and another “Resident of Kent,” these epithets denoting age-old wisdom and practicality as well as someone living in the so-called ‘Garden of England’ that produced much of the nation’s soft fruit harvest (21 & 23 January 1918, 2). Another correspondent writing about “Food Waste in Ships” signed himself off as “Victualling Superintendent” (22 January 1917, 4), and a contributor to another long-running correspondence on “Standard Bread” signed themselves off as “Housekeeper,” again emphasizing their authority to speak on the subject of food and nutrition (28 January 1915, 3). Others used humorous or punning epithets. A contributor to the pig-keeping debate signed off as “Food Hog” (“Keep a Pig” 3 November 1917, 2), while a correspondent advising readers to trap and eat sparrows signed off as “Rustic,” denoting either a keeper of country lore or, more likely, used the term in the comedic, Shakespearean sense, meaning a simpleton or joker. Either way, the pseudonym was designed both to preserve the writer’s anonymity and add texture and enjoyment to the reading of the letter.

Examined together, these letters provide valuable insight into the relationship between readers and their newspaper at a time of national crisis, with readers boosting and contributing to their paper’s coverage on vital issues. The paper, in return, granted a certain degree of democratisation to its coverage by allowing readers to publicly assert their expertise in their fields. The gatekeeping control, however, of the editorial board does not show us what kinds of letters were left out.

Conclusion

The *Daily Mail* ended the war with circulation slightly higher than in 1914, and as the highest circulation morning paper in the country, overtaking the *Daily Mirror*, at daily sales of 973,343 in 1918 (up from 945,919 in 1914). Although circulation was down from a wartime peak of nearly 1.2 million in 1916, in early 1917 the paper had increased in price from half a pence to a penny, as many papers had done, to cover the increasing costs of newsprint and reduced advertising income (McEwen 1982, 482). This increased circulation, at a time when disposable household incomes had fallen, shows how popular the paper remained among its readers, despite the widespread view that its coverage of the progress of the fighting in the trenches had been woefully inadequate.

While the role of newspapers in the First World War has been widely criticised, we must also examine the important service these papers provided in helping readers navigate the most severe domestic crisis any of them had ever experienced. Readers evidently turned to newspapers for practical help, even as they felt terrified, or misled, by the war news coverage. Detailed examination of the *Daily Mail's* coverage of food in a variety of sections, from journalist-authored news reports, to the editor's leaders, to recipes and readers' letters, reveals a close and mutually reinforcing relationship between the paper and its readers. By encouraging thrift, by enabling women to take on a patriotic role in the war effort, and by sanctioning hoarders and profiteers and defining them as alien 'others' at a time of crisis, the paper reinforced the idea of 'cultural citizenship,' an affective state of national belonging that goes beyond legal rights. By establishing an 'ideal' attitude to food and privations, the paper helped its readers "navigate their sense of belonging" and showed women how to "situate themselves through behaviour and practices as worthy of rights," a vital precursor to being given full voting rights (Beaman 2016, 851).

This chapter partly explains why the *Daily Mail* and other papers enjoyed such popularity and how "the British press reached an unprecedented level of importance during

the First World War, never to attain such heights again” (McEwen 1982, 459) despite, as one newspaper insider admitted, the fact that newspaper mendacity meant that “You can’t believe a word you read” (Montague 1922, 103). Readers and their newspaper worked together, collaborating in crafting a national identity and character that would help win the war. The paper permitted readers a degree of active participation in the production of content, allowing them to share their culinary expertise during the years of most severe privation. However, once the hostilities were over, the *Daily Mail* reverted to its traditional role of provider of information and advice to a passive readership. The Food Bureau not only provided vital advice to readers but also, by deliberately mimicking the features of Britain’s pre-eminent department store, allowed the paper to retain its image as a paper for the middle classes, maintaining its one penny readership and advertising revenue.

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