Reading skin in Victorian newspapers: an analysis of British newspapers' coverage of human skin, 1840-1900

This thesis employs keyword-based searches in digital newspaper archives to identify recurrent patterns and themes in reports concerning human skin between the years 1840 and 1900 in Britain. The thesis argues that Victorian newspapers used the skin to foster three main Victorian social campaigns: the sanitation movement, which aimed at improving health and disseminating awareness about the importance of personal hygiene and cleanliness; the anti-Poor Law campaign, which created opposition to the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, in particular to the establishment of deterrent workhouses; and the campaign to abolish flogging in the military, a movement started earlier in the century which was to see its greatest achievement in 1881 with the official suppression of the practice after a long series of legal reforms. Regular news coverage of stories related to the human skin fulfilled two more purposes, the epistemological and the commercial. It enhanced the popular understanding of dermatology and attracted revenue in the form of advertisements from the booming skin products market.

The thesis is broken down into six main chapters. Following the literature review and a methodological section, the third chapter shows the two main trends that dominated the media portrayal of the skin within both advertisements and news. The subsequent chapter explores how the idea of the skin as a stratified organ was disseminated through the news coverage of a flogging inquest by The Times newspaper. The fifth chapter continues examining The Times but moves from the anti-flogging campaign to the anti-Poor Law campaign. This section explores how the paper covered cases regarding the mistreated skin of the poorest classes and cases of death by starvation and neglect. The final chapter looks at the local and national news coverage of occupational skin diseases, with a focus on coal miners and chimney sweeps.

The thesis proposes a new perspective on the history of journalism: it looks at the news coverage of a specific aspect of human anatomy and shows how this fitted the Victorian newspapers regarding four main social issues: public health, poverty, the conditions of soldiers and the condition of the working class.
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