ORIGINAL RESEARCH


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Abstract This article examines how the British press represented Patrick Steptoe and Robert Edwards in the story of the birth of the first ‘test-tube baby’, Louise Brown. In 1978, the British press represented the birth of Louise Brown as both a success and a source of hope. The main pairs of protagonists in this story were Steptoe and Edwards and Lesley and John Brown, who metonymically represented British science and infertile couples, respectively. In the dominant ‘success’ narrative of the birth of Louise Brown as depicted in the British press in 1978, Edwards and Steptoe seemed to embody ‘British’ values of industriousness, perseverance, altruism, ingenuity and teamwork. Thus, their success was simultaneously a British success. With Louise Brown’s birth, in-vitro fertilization came to stand for the potential happiness of infertile people and a bright future for British science and industry.

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Introduction

Scholars and journalists alike typically cite the birth of Louise Brown, the world’s first ‘test-tube baby’, in Oldham, Greater Manchester, UK on 25 July 1978 as the origin story of in-vitro fertilization (IVF). The birth was not only a medical ‘breakthrough’, but also a media sensation. Important scholarly and journalistic work has been done on the international (and particularly American-led) media response to this key event in 20th-century medical science (Condit, 1994; Harris, 2006; Henig, 2004; Nelkin and Raymond, 1980; Seguin, 2001; Van...
John Brown, and success for Edwards and Steptoe, which brought about Louise Brown’s birth. The public response to assisted reproduction has been both the moral ideology of a socially conservative historical context that celebrated family values – which also chimed with the stance of most British newspapers put Patrick Steptoe at the forefront of their reports about the pair. While much of their success was attributed to their teamwork, Steptoe, the older man who had a rather commanding manner, was assumed to be the leading figure, although the pair thought of their partnership as equal and complementary. The newspapers did not mention Jean Purdy, their clinical assistant, whom Edwards and Steptoe considered invaluable to their work (Johnson and Elder, 2015a, b).

Assisted reproductive technology continues to stimulate media interest and public debate, and Louise Brown’s birth is routinely referred back to as the origin point of any article. Of course, it is always difficult to gauge exactly what effect media has on its audience, but as Adrian Bingham (2009) reports, although newspapers had started to lose their position as the main source of news to television by the 1970s, newspaper reading was still widespread throughout British society and, he argues, reading the nationals produced in London even seemed to foster a sense of national community above and beyond local or regional identity (2009: 16). Over time, the public response to assisted reproduction has been variable, reflecting a deep-seated ambivalence, which is also true of broader attitudes to science and technology in the 20th century (Franklin, 2013; Turney, 1998). From the discovery of penicillin to the development of nuclear bombs, the 20th century brought a rapid array of new technologies that offered not only new hope for life through the eradication of disease but also the spectre of death (Edgerton and Pickstone, 2008). As Ayesha Nathoo (2009: 33–34) notes, by the 1960s, medical innovations were still celebrated in the media, but were no longer thought of as an area that needed protection from criticism. By the late 1970s, the application of investigative journalism techniques to science stories was well established. Given this, the positivity with which the British press framed IVF within the story of the birth of Louise Brown in 1978 is notable, and it underlines the point that something more was at stake than the happiness of Lesley and John Brown at the birth of their daughter.

Louise Brown was born just months before the Winter of Discontent, which marked the culmination of a series of severe industrial disputes that led to the downfall of Prime Minister Jim Callaghan, and ushered in a new era of neoliberal economic policy and increased social conservatism under his successor, Margaret Thatcher. A sense of Britain as a divided nation with profound economic troubles would have been particularly acute somewhere like Oldham, a former milling and mining town that had, at its peak, produced more spun cotton that France and Germany combined, but which now epitomized the decline of the industrial North and waning of secure employment in the latter half of the 20th century. In the dominant press narrative of the time, Steptoe and Edwards were seen to embody certain values that allowed them to be the pioneers of IVF, but they were celebrated not only for their personal success, but also with national pride. Therefore, the story of the birth of Louise Brown was, in the newspapers of the time, a story of British ingenuity and hard work. It spoke of both the moral ideology of a socially conservative historical context that celebrated ‘family values’ – which also chimed with the stance of most British newspapers – and of hope for British industry and innovation in a time of economic and political turmoil, and declining geopolitical influence.

1 In the newspapers’ coverage of the story, science and medicine were typically elided, and Steptoe and Edwards were described as both scientists and doctors. I have reflected this in this article by treating the press’ representation of the story of the birth of Louise Brown as a scientific and medical story (and, of course, it touched on many more domains of life besides).

2 Nelkin notes that media coverage of science stories often reflects a ‘preoccupation with the existence, not the substance, of controversy’ (1987: 58).
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