A feature of the year was the excess of illustration, if, indeed, you can call that illustration which illustrates nothing. It is unfortunately, our own art which has brought upon us this plague of unnecessary pictures from which we suffer. In some papers illustrations are so numerous – and so bad – that editors can find nothing to say about them, and dot them over their pages without any apparent object.

– Henry Peach Robinson, Photographic News, December 28, 1894

By the middle of the 1890s there was an unmistakable shift in the appearance and ubiquity of the mass-reproduced image. Distinguished photographer Henry Peach Robinson and other observers noticed that images, particularly halftone photographs, had achieved a greater prominence in the press, even constituting a deluge, and many blamed photomechanical reproduction for degrading the visual world. The Levy screens that made halftone reproduction a commercially viable undertaking were obtainable in Britain in 1893, and from this point on the debates around the mass image became more intense. However, it is important to stress that the availability of the technology itself was not the determining factor here. Rather, a number of interwoven cultural and economic forces helped shape the new illustrated magazine so that it could embrace the halftone photograph. As far as Henry Peach Robinson was concerned, these photographs were “unnecessary pictures” randomly scattered about the magazine page, not telling the viewer anything. But their popularity suggests otherwise. I suggest that the multiplicity of the halftone photograph was in itself meaningful and this abundance of fragments necessary in the creation and active maintenance of the social. The fact is that the rapid consumption of the photograph, as well as the minimal pen-and-ink sketch, for that matter, made them both particularly useful in an era that envisaged itself as moving at increasing speed.

Many observers from the 1890s onwards have argued that wood engraving was simply unable to keep pace with the increasing demand for images, that
it was too slow and expensive. While it is true that the halftone appeared
to be cheaper and quicker to produce than the wood engraving, once the
costs and the time taken in retouching and re-engraving were included,
the savings may not have been great. What was important was that the
process image looked quicker than the wood engraving and appeared to be
a facsimile rather than a translation, both factors important to its accept-
ance with magazines. The criteria for the success and application of these
imaging and reproduction technologies were, however, complex. At times
critics and process workers believed that the halftone was a fad that might
fade away or that it would be, at best, one of a range of methods used; hand
engraving was dismissed as old-fashioned, only to be reinstated as an artistic
alternative to the machine-made image; and the photograph was thought to
be a hackneyed and vulgar form that might well disappear from the press.

Process reproduction had to meet not only the expectations and demands
of the mass audience, but also operate within the economic structures
of capitalist industrial production. Photomechanical processes fitted fairly
neatly within an assembly-line system, in which tasks were divided into
easily mastered segments. Crucially, this segmentation included the separ-
ation of the author of the image from the workers who reproduced it. Wood
engraving had attempted to move to a factory system by becoming increas-
ingly fragmented and specialized and by adopting a facsimile approach. It
was able to rival the mechanical processes in terms of speed and cheapness
and to outdo halftone reproduction in its ease of printing. But the obvious
presence of the engraver’s hand, manifested in the lines of the engraving,
had now become an insurmountable difficulty. Not only did the engraved
line suggest more time taken to produce the image, it branded the repro-
duction as a translation. Process, on the other hand, managed to conceal its
production and appeared to be a facsimile rather than an interpretation. One
of process’s major advantages was that it allowed, therefore, for the separ-
ation of creativity from reproduction. Authorship became located entirely
within the artist’s hands, and the illustration became the product of one
individual, rather than an interpretive team.

Cultural expectations had changed since the 1840s, and faithfulness to
the original, rather than translation and interpretation, had become the
new standard for reproduction. Photography was used as a method of
duplication, for instance, providing photographic prints of paintings to Art
Union subscribers, thereby influencing the expectations of other reproductive
processes. The photograph became the criterion for effective reproduction.
Just as the photograph was seen as an authorless and unmediated trace of
external reality, photographic processes of reproduction were promoted as
direct channels of communication in which the hand had been excised.
Of course, the photograph was not purely mechanical; human agency
operated at all stages, from the design and manufacture of equipment
and film to decisions about what to shoot and how to shoot it. In the