

The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Modern American Journalism

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WHEN DISCUSSING modern American journalism, it is useful to keep two perspectives in mind. The first perspective, which I call the media-as-business perspective, was summed up in the words of one editor, who said, 'The newspaper is not a missionary or a charitable institution, but a business that collects and publishes news which the people want and are willing to buy.'¹ The second perspective, which I refer to as the media-and-democracy perspective, was summed up by another editor, who noted that the press was the safeguard of public liberty and democracy: 'When every other bulwark of our liberties is gone, the free press will remain to preserve the liberties which we shall hand down to our children.'²

These two perspectives, so different from one another, are both accurate. A quick survey of contemporary American mass media reveals many examples of the pursuit of the bottom line. Gossipy tabloids, so-called 'trash TV,' and so much of entertainment writing and programming are designed to maximize profits. But, at

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1. *Newspaperdom*, July 1892, p. 3.

2. Charles A. Dana, 'Power of the Press' (address to the Wisconsin Editorial Association), *St. Louis Republic*, July 25, 1888, p. 1.

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the same time, one need not look far to find high quality in news reporting. Newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* are well known for such quality, but many newspapers in other towns across the land are also dedicated to quality and public information.

What is so interesting about these two perspectives is that they point out the tension in the American media today. The media are private businesses, but they are also cloaked with immense social responsibility. Most private businesses are expected to try to maximize profits, but when media companies do so, many worry that the quality of information will decline.

These perspectives are also fascinating because, although they so clearly capture the essence of the contemporary American press, they originate from a hundred years ago. The first quotation cited above is from a Missouri editor speaking in 1892; the other is from the New York City editor Charles A. Dana, speaking in 1888. And therein lies the substance of tonight's talk on the nineteenth-century origins of modern journalism. This talk focuses on these two perspectives—so true today, so true a century ago—and attempts to discuss and detail three points: first, how a press so dedicated to profit and so dedicated to the public good evolved; second, how these two perspectives translated into actual newspaper content; and third, what concerns remain for us today.

The antebellum partisan press provides the baseline for changes in the press over the course of the nineteenth century. In the early decades of the century, circa 1825, the vast majority of American newspapers were highly political in content. Cities and towns such as Boston or Worcester were served by newspapers representing each of the major parties in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts of that day: the Jacksonian Democrats, the National Republicans (later called the Whigs), and a third party, the Antimasons. Indeed, newspapers were the very symbol of partisan activity in that era.

Partisan advocacy was the central content of these newspapers, and what we would call editorials today constituted the form of newspaper writing. Editors distrusted claims of neutrality in poli-

tics; rather, partisanship was deemed a badge of honor and integrity.³ Moreover, many editors were partisan activists who not only edited their party's paper but also worked to organize party activities in their town or area.⁴ Subsidies from political parties and from governmental patronage sustained the antebellum partisan press. At no time in our history has circulation alone been able to pay the entire costs of the newspaper, and in the early nineteenth century political patronage often spelled the difference between success or failure for many newspapers.

These various characteristics of the partisan press are important, for they help to define its operation and content. What was fundamental to the partisan press, however, was its view of the reader as voter. One should not romanticize this view, for that reader was white and male; nevertheless, the purpose and intent of the press revolved around public information and news.

This partisan press changed during the course of the nineteenth century in response to the impact of the American industrial revolution and to new definitions of the role of the press in American society. The key attributes of the industrial revolution were three: mass production, mass distribution, and mass marketing. As national markets (characterized by the extensive distribution of mass-produced goods) replaced the local markets of an earlier era, American businesses needed to market their goods on a mass scale. And so businesses came to see the media as their lifeline to consumers.

By 1900, advertising revenues accounted for as much as two-thirds of all newspaper revenues.⁵ One writer noted that revenues from subscriptions, at most, could purchase blank news print. Everything else in the newspapers—news gathering, pictures,

3. *Western Argus*, Lyons, New York, August 1, 1832, p. 3.

4. William E. Ames, *A History of the National Intelligencer* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972), passim; Gerald J. Baldasty 'The Press and Politics in the Age of Jackson,' *Journalism Monographs* (1984), passim.

5. *Report of the Proceedings, Ninth Annual Convention of the American Newspaper Publishers Association Held in New York, February 20-22, 1895* (New York: American Newspaper Publishers Association Office, 1895), p. 62.

salaries, production, and delivery—all were made possible by advertising revenues.⁶ The advertising agent Artemas Ward noted in 1894 that it was a 'well known fact' that only six newspapers, out of 18,000 nationwide, could exist without advertising.⁷ Moreover, advertisers defined readers not as voters, as had antebellum partisan editors, but as consumers. Advertisers valued newspapers primarily as marketing links to the consumer and so defined the audience in terms of its ability to buy goods.

Advertisers were also concerned about how their ads appeared.⁸ Many advertisers insisted that their ads appear alongside news articles, where they would be spotted more readily than if they were buried in a heap of other ads. Other advertisers wanted to be sure that their competitors' ads were nowhere near their own. And such concerns about ad placement were certainly sensible from a business perspective. Given their power and their view of the press as a marketing vehicle, advertisers were concerned not just with their own ads but with the entire content of the press. Trade journals urged newspaper editors to produce 'bright and lively'⁹ news that would lure readers and please advertisers. And some advertisers were quick to try to censor news they did not like. In New York City, one department store tried to get that city's newspapers to suppress the details of a lawsuit pending against it; according to Charles Dana, five newspapers gave in to the pressure.¹⁰ And some advertisers warned newspapers not to endorse William Jennings Bryan's presidential race in 1896, and when newspapers refused to buckle under, advertisements were withdrawn, contracts were canceled.¹¹

Advertising long had been a part of the American press, but in the late nineteenth century it emerged as a larger and more powerful constituent than ever before. And most importantly, it had a

6. *Fame*, September 1894, p. 258.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Advertising Experience*, February 1901, p. 19.

9. *Newspaperdom*, June 1892, p. 9.

10. *The Newspaper Maker*, December 23, 1898, p. 4.

11. *The Newspaper Maker*, September 10, 1896, p. 4.

particular vision of the newspaper audience, seeing the reader as consumer. Advertisers were not shy about using their power, and they worked to fashion a newspaper that was amenable to their marketing interests.

As advertising grew, so, too, did the *business* of the press. By 1900, the American newspaper (particularly in the metropolitan areas but also in small cities and towns across the land) was no longer the product of a single rabble-rousing political activist, as it had been in 1830. Rather, the newspaper had become a relatively complex business enterprise, demanding careful management. The amount of money involved in the newspaper industry—in terms of initial capital investment and in terms of production costs—soared. Charles Dana estimated that \$10,000 was adequate capital to start a solid urban daily in 1830 in New York City; by 1890, one would have needed \$500,000 to \$1 million.¹² Metropolitan newspapers in 1900 spent \$100,000 (or more) a year on news gathering alone; many such papers spent \$200,000 a year on newsprint.¹³

During this period, newspapers were becoming complex, departmentalized businesses. Metropolitan papers had hundreds of employees (the New York *World*, the country's biggest newspaper in 1895, had 1,200 employees)¹⁴ working in a variety of departments: circulation, production, news gathering and editing, distribution, advertising, and accounting. Overseeing the entire operation was the publisher, more often than not someone whose background was in business, not in journalism. The length of newspapers also grew larger than ever before. In 1830, even urban dailies were usually only four pages in length; the four-page weekly was the most common format in the nation. By 1900, urban newspapers of twelve or sixteen pages weekdays, rising to thirty-six or forty-eight or more pages on Sundays, were common. With all of this, the news gathering task (and cost) was much greater than ever

12. *Printer's Ink*, May 28, 1890, pp. 869–70.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *The Newspaper Maker*, April 24, 1895, p. 8.

before. And competition was intense. Most urban and metropolitan newspapers sought a monopoly within their circulation area, so they competed fiercely with one another through news gathering, contests, and various premiums.

These two business-related developments—the rise of advertising and the growing complexity of the newspaper business—had a direct impact on content, producing newspapers that would appeal to advertisers and that would appeal to large numbers of readers. The desire, and need, to please advertisers focused the attention of newspaper owners and operators on the demographic profile of the reading audience. Advertisers, defining the newspaper as part of their general marketing plan, wanted to reach readers with money to spend. As one advertising agent in 1893 noted, ‘The questions always to be asked are: What class of persons does this publication reach, and are they likely to be purchasers of my goods?’¹⁵ Such a question makes good business sense, for it would be folly to advertise winter coats in the tropics. But the concern over audience demographics went far beyond such simplistic notions of audience needs. Rather, newspapers came to differentiate readers by their purchasing power. One advertising agent noted that the *St. Paul Dispatch* was an ideal advertising medium for ‘the great masses’ but that retailers seeking the ‘upper class’ should rely on the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*.¹⁶ An upper-class newspaper could demand substantially higher advertising rates than a lower-class one.

The term ‘quality’ was often used in describing the reading audience of various publications and was meant to signify the ability to spend money. As such, most newspapers in urban America aimed their content at the middle and upper classes, and particularly to the key consumers in the country—the family, specifically, women, who did the shopping for most families.¹⁷ Indeed, the

15. *Advertising Experience*, June 1899, p. 6.

16. Charles Austin Bates, *Criticisms* (New York: Printed for the author, 1897), p. 222.

17. Lyman Morse, *Advertisers' Handy Guide* (New York: Printed for the author, 1896), pp. 706–7; Addison Archer, *American Journalism from the Practical Side* (New York: Holmes Publishing Co., 1897), p. 3.

single most favored demographic target was the woman in a middle- or upper-class home. Nathaniel Fowler, Jr., an advertising writer and consultant noted, 'A Woman who does not read advertisements would not be a woman. Consequently, all women read advertisements.'¹⁸

Beyond demographics, newspapers were also eager to promote their own advertisers in their news columns. 'Puffs'—free promotions of a business—were common. A newspaper might call attention to a particularly fine sale at a local department store.¹⁹ And newspapers also advocated the general business interests of their advertisers. Probably the most vivid example of this was the newspaper industry's defense of the patent medicine industry in the late nineteenth century. Various state legislatures considered labeling laws that would have required patent medicine manufacturers to disclose the contents of their goods. Some manufacturers worried that their secret formulae could be used by others. But nagging concerns focused most on the high level of alcohol in many of the 'medicines' as well as the occasional presence of some poisons. Patent medicines circulated widely in the abstemious Bible Belt—and such disclosures might well have destroyed the entire industry. Newspapers supported their patent medicine advertisers in assailing these proposed labeling laws.²⁰

As the century advanced, commercial interests seemed increasingly paramount in the American newspaper, preempting the notion of the press as a prime source for public information and news and instituting instead an industry that equated its own narrow commercial interests (and those of its advertisers) with the public good. The definition of the reader as consumer ignored or devalued the poor and further emphasized a retreat by the press from full participation in the democratic process.

Attention both to the general concerns of advertisers and the

18. *Printer's Ink*, July 22, 1892, p. 51.

19. *Printer's Ink*, January 15, 1890, p. 262; A. O. Bunnell, comp., *New York Press Association: Authorized History for Fifty Years, 1853-1903* (Dansville, N.Y.: F. A. Owen Publishing Co., 1903), p. 28; *Ad Sense*, August 1900, p. 34.

20. *The Newspaper Maker*, December 8, 1897, p. 4; February 17, 1898, p. 1.

complex newspaper business also demanded that readers be attracted to the newspaper in large numbers. To answer this need, publishers and editors attempted to produce a paper vivid in its graphics and interesting in its content that would please any potential reader. The key to the emerging newspaper was diversity. One writer compared a great newspaper to a great restaurant, where 'no one expects to go through the whole bill of fare.'²¹ So newspapers provided a great variety of information, news, and entertainment, 'whatever you most like to read.'²² News items on the theater, vaudeville, sports, women's fashions, recipes, and even serialized fiction became common parts of the American newspaper. In 1898, one Sunday's edition of the Pittsburgh *Leader* provided articles on how to eat with chopsticks, gold speculation in British Columbia, big game hunting, identical twins in Michigan, spring fashions for men, gossip about former President Grover Cleveland and his family, fashions (including 'April wraps: Novelty coats and capes that captivate feminine fancy' and the startling news that 'the all-conquering blouse has suffered its first defeat and threatens to disappear altogether'), women polar explorers, amateur baking, egg farming, women fire fighters, traveling in Europe, prominent species of American trees, insect life, and fiction.²³

Politics still figured in the content of the American press, running about 15 percent of any newspaper's average news hole. But the rest of the newspaper was filled with a great variety of items, reflecting the growing leisure time of the reading audience and the emergence of newspaper reading as a leisure activity. And, at times, the urge to produce a paper to attract the public's attention led to lurid, sensational, or tear-jerking stories. Such stories concerned the everyday lives of Americans, tragic suicides, scandalous divorces, sordid crimes, and grisly murders. Some of these reports did indeed boost circulation; on some newspapers, reporters re-

21. *Newspaperdom*, July 1892, p. 3.

22. Pittsburgh *Leader*, January 21, 1898, p. 8.

23. Pittsburgh *Leader*, April 2, 1898, p. 4.

ceived bonuses for such stories, thus creating an economic incentive for sensationalism.

These tremendous changes in the business of the press—and their impact on content—are quite clear by century's end. But equally clear are the changes within American political life itself that led to changes in the political role of the press. By the 1860s and 1870s, widespread distrust of government, and of politicians in particular, had swept much of the nation. U.S. Grant, for instance, placed forty of his relatives on the public payroll, four of his cabinet members were indicted or nearly indicted, and scandals touched his vice-president and most leading members of Congress.²⁴ In addition, the graft at the state level grew so extensive that it became 'a vast and succulent barbecue.'²⁵ In his study *Boss Tweed's New York*, Seymour Mandelbaum notes that 'politicians were derided as stupid demagogues, whose choice of a profession was almost certain evidence of venality.'²⁶

Readers were changing as well. Although many remained highly partisan, the percentage of Americans considering themselves politically as independents rose in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. The common wisdom in the press and in newspaper industry trade journals was that readers wanted to make up their own minds about politics and thus wanted facts about the world, from which they would draw their own conclusions. One journalist wrote, 'There is a sentiment gaining ground to the effect that the public wants its politics "straight."²⁷ Indeed, the press itself took on an increasingly complex role. Cut loose from political parties, as patronage declined and as distrust of parties grew, American newspapers began to look not just at politics but at the wide range of American life. One Portland, Oregon, minister,

24. David Loth, *Public Plunder: A History of Graft in America* (New York: Carrick and Evans, 1938), pp. 187–89; Matthew Josephson, *The Politicos, 1865–1896* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1939), pp. 180–213.

25. Eric F. Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), p. 12.

26. Seymour J. Mandelbaum, *Boss Tweed's New York* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965), p. 47.

27. *Newspaperdom*, January 1893, p. 24.

called the press the nation's great educator, for 'it is the only library multitudes ever think of or care for.'²⁸

Given these changes in politics and in the role of the press in public opinion formation, publishers and editors tried to come to terms with what their role should be within American society. They recognized that they should be independent of government. For some newspapers, that meant total independence from all politicians. The *Chicago Daily News*, established in the 1870s, noted that it had 'No axes to grind, no friends to reward, and no enemies to punish.'²⁹ But independence also meant that papers with strong partisan ideals, be they Democratic, Republican, or some other party, would be independent of party dictation. One Democratic newspaper reminded its readers that it was truly Democratic but also pledged to scrutinize Democratic officials or candidates with the same care that would be given to Republicans.³⁰ The result was a certain distancing from politicians, the growth of the press more or less as an autonomous institution rather than an adjunct to political parties. Along with this, publishers and editors realized that readers wanted the press to be a watchdog on government. Thomas Paine obviously had been right; government is the badge of lost innocence. The result, in terms of press content, was a more adversarial position vis-a-vis politicians. Editors and newspapers condemned governmental fraud, indifference, and secrecy. The press emerged as the conscience of the larger society, covering all issues, even the unpleasant ones. One editor noted that he believed it was his responsibility to cover difficult issues—'living issues, fraught with deepest concern.'³¹ Problems in sanitation, crowded tenements, mental institutions, meat-packing plants and hospitals—to name just a few—came under the careful scrutiny of the American press. At century's end, H. L. Mencken noted that it was a crusading time

28. Rev. Frederic R. Marvin, 'Editors and Newspapers: A Sermon' (Portland, Ore.: George H. Hines, 1883), n.p.

29. Jason Rogers, *Newspaper Building* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1918), p. 8.

30. *St. Louis Republic*, May 31, 1888, p. 8.

31. Quoted in the *St. Paul Globe*, July 28, 1885, p. 2.

both for society and for newspapers: 'I recall crusades against sweat-shops, against the shanghaiing of men for the Chesapeake oyster fleet, and against dance-halls that paid their female interns commissions on the drinks sold. I had a hand in all of them.'³² And newspapers promoted better parks, libraries, schools, and museums, again as the conscience of society at large.

By the end of the century, it became standard editorial policy for the press to present news based on facts, rather than producing the political essays that had characterized so much of the antebellum press. One 1890s journalism textbook extolled the value of 'facts, facts, and more facts.'³³ The middle and late nineteenth century witnessed the rise of the reporter, the foot soldier of facts. Americans had to become accustomed to the rise of the reporter, the constant searching for interviews, and the relatively intrusive nature of news gathering as it developed. One story gives some sense of the change that occurred in a relatively short amount of time. In 1850, Daniel Webster was giving a speech in a town near Boston. One reporter, working at a Boston newspaper, suggested that the paper ought to send a reporter to cover the story. The editor demurred, noting that someone who attended the speech was bound to write it up and send it in to the newspaper in a day or two.³⁴ By 1890 or 1900, all of the major Boston newspapers and even some of the newspapers in outlying areas would probably have had a reporter at the event.

These developments posed concerns within society and within journalism in the late nineteenth century, concerns that endure to the present time. In the nineteenth century, as today, politicians worried about the zeal and power of the press. As one might expect, politicians were not happy with the new-found independence or adversarial nature of the press. In the 1830s, a politician who had been attacked by a partisan newspaper could usually depend upon his own party's newspaper to defend his reputation

32. H. L. Mencken, *Newspaper Days* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), p. 37.

33. Charles H. Olin, *Journalism* (Philadelphia: The Penn Publishing Co., 1906), p. 14.

34. *Newspaperdom*, July 1892, p. 2.

and actions. But such sure and quick defense was no longer to be expected by century's end; indeed, politicians were united across party lines in defining the press as an opponent. Legislators in California actually banned political cartoons (an act overturned by the state's supreme court), and legislators in New York considered such a ban.³⁵ Politicians would not be entirely comfortable with the press ever again, sometimes blaming it for their woes and often trying to circumvent its steady scrutiny. Some would see the press as entirely too critical of government or politicians; others would urge even greater governmental scrutiny.

Moreover, as their twentieth-century counterparts feel, many Americans, ordinary citizens, in the nineteenth century came to think that the press may well have become too intrusive, too zealous in reporting on all the facts of contemporary life. Brandeis and Warren's path-breaking treatise on privacy was written in 1890 in response to newspaper inquisitiveness.³⁶ A more serious problem was the press's failure to provide context in the news. In one way, the most seriously decontextualized news was the highly sensationalistic murder or suicide, blown completely out of proportion by lurid headlines and graphic drawings or photographs. But people were also overwhelmed by the sheer crush of 'facts, facts, and more facts' and despaired at times of finding meaning in their newspaper.

Part of the problem here, however, was the proverbial problem of blaming the messenger for the message. Crime news, so much a part of urban life in the late nineteenth century, naturally figured in the content of American newspapers. Critics of the newspaper industry were quick to accuse newspapers of somehow fostering crime by reporting it.³⁷

Without assigning fault, suffice it to say that these issues still

35. *The Newspaper Maker*, January 26, 1899, p. 4; March 2, 1899, p. 4; April 13, 1899, p. 5; April 20, 1899, p. 1; May 4, 1899, p. 5.

36. Louis Brandeis and Charles Warren, 'The Right to Privacy,' *Harvard Law Review* 4 (1890): 193-211.

37. The folly of such criticism can best be seen by inverting the proposition: Would anyone seriously think that all crime would stop if newspapers ignored it?

resonate in American society today. Debate and discussion over the press and privacy and violence continue unabated to the present day, and a wide range of press critics (and journalists and editors) worry about the context and meaning of news. The tension between profit and responsibility, so much a part of the institution of journalism in this country, continues to invite concern. Of course, it is possible both to achieve profit and to be highly responsible, but the lines are fuzzy, the methods not always clear (at least to the public), and so concerns remain. When readers are defined primarily or solely as consumers, then, indeed, a measure of responsibility (vis-a-vis the political process) has clearly been abdicated. Such a definition places value on wealth and inevitably excludes the poor from active participation in a democratic society's debate. If advertisers are the sole driving force in the American newspapers—as some advertisers clearly believed in the 1890s—then the entire notion of a newspaper is turned on its head, and news becomes not the main function of the paper but a mere sideline to ads. On the other hand, as the Missouri editor pointed out in 1892, newspapers are not charitable organizations.

Experience has shown that there are no quick or easy answers to these concerns about government-press relations, privacy, violence, or balancing profits with responsibility. Indeed, the enduring tension between the press-as-business and the press-and-democracy models no doubt invite continuing debate. Democracy itself is a fairly contentious and lively mechanism for government; so, too, is the press that is a part of it.

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