

*Preparing the Minds of the People:
Three Hundred Years of
the American Newspaper*

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THE AMERICAN NEWSPAPER is a remarkable institution, an intriguing and important historical achievement, today the most representative carrier and construer and creator of modern public consciousness. But its very familiarity may make this difficult to keep in mind. It is both remarkable and ordinary at once, and it has been so at least since Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote about it in his journal 140 years ago: "The immense amount of valuable knowledge now afloat in society enriches the newspapers, so that one cannot snatch an old newspaper to wrap his shoes in, without his eye being caught by some paragraph of precious science out of London or Paris which he hesitates to lose forever. My wife grows nervous when I give her waste paper lest she is burning holy writ, and wishes to read it before she puts it under her pies."¹

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1. *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman, et al., 16 vols. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1973), 10: 353 (journal entry of 1848).

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But, then, of course, she does put it under her pies, a practice that says something important about the everydayness of the newspaper as opposed, say, to books—or as opposed to newspapers a few generations earlier. In the eighteenth century, Samuel Sewall of Boston collected and bound his newspapers and Martha Moore Ballard, a Maine midwife, did so as late as 1799, when she recorded in her diary that she spent the day ‘putting the newspapers in regular order and sewing them.’² Notice, in Emerson’s remark, the dubious attitude toward those paragraphs of precious science and toward any attitude that would take them as holy writ. And notice also that Emerson takes the newspaper to be relaying information about the world, paragraphs of precious science, rather than picturing some aspect of the world from a given point of view for an appointed purpose. He takes what we call the newspaper to be a purveyor of news rather than a promoter of views.

This was not always so in journalism. Indeed, it is probably not going too far to say that the penny press invented news in the 1830s, and that the nineteenth century invented reporting.³ It is true that Shakespeare’s Richard III inquired of Ratcliff, ‘How now! What news?’ and of Lord Stanley, ‘Stanley, what news with you?’ But Richard sought military intelligence, not what we know as news. That is, he did not seek to satisfy a general curiosity about the world. He did not seek to keep abreast of current affairs as part of a general surveillance of the world or as currency in social relations. He certainly did not seek a journalist’s evaluation of what is of general interest and importance in the world happening that day. He did not, in a word, seek what we think of as news.

In my remarks tonight, I want to pursue this notion that news is a historically situated category rather than a universal and timeless feature of human societies. I want also to suggest that if the very category of news is a historical precipitate, so is any particular

2. Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 273, 184.

3. Others suspect this goes very much too far. See Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News* (New York: Viking, 1988), p. 4, and Martin Mayer, *Making News* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1987), p. 21.

news story a social construction. That is, a news story is an account of the 'real world,' just as a rumor is another kind of account of the real world, and a historical novel another sort of account of the real world. It is not reality itself (as if any sequence of words and sentences could be) but a transcription, and any transcription is a transformation, a simplification, and a reduction. The newspaper, as the carrier of news stories, participates in the construction of the mental worlds in which we live rather than in the reproduction of the 'real world' we live in relation to. This does not suggest that when we read of a military battle in the newspaper we should necessarily doubt that a battle took place. It does mean that when French citizens read in their newspapers of the battle of Waterloo they read a very different story and incorporated it into a very different scenario than did the English reading their newspapers. As Walter Lippmann insisted in *Public Opinion*, people respond not to the world but to the 'pictures in their heads,' something very different.⁴ The pictures people have, or fail to have, in their heads, have very real consequences: the battle of New Orleans was fought in 1815, and people died in it, because their picture was that they were engaged in a war when, in London and in Washington, the war was already over. But military officers in New Orleans had fatefully and fatally different pictures in their heads.

It should come as no surprise that there is confusion about the social and, particularly, the historical construction of news because standard treatments of general history omit journalism altogether. I say this with some caution about European history, since I am less familiar with those materials, but I will say it with assurance about American historiography. Take, for instance, a leading college textbook in American history, John Blum's *The National Experience*.⁵ What do we learn there of Zenger and Franklin and Greeley, Hearst and Lippmann and Paley, not to mention the likes

4. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922).

5. John M. Blum et al., *The National Experience*, 7th ed. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988).

of James Franklin or William Lloyd Garrison or Edward R. Murrow or Woodward and Bernstein? Well, James Franklin, the first journalist in the world to report the vote count on a bill in a legislature, is not mentioned. Zenger is not mentioned. Garrison is mentioned as a peace movement activist and then as an anti-slavery activist and editor of *The Liberator*. His brief treatment takes in more of his journalistic role than any other figure I looked up, although this is backhandedly used to diminish his historical importance: 'But he was more an editor and publicist than an effective leader and tactician, and the movement soon grew too large for him to control.' Greeley is mentioned as a presidential candidate in 1872. He is described as editor of 'the influential' *New York Tribune*, but there is not a word about what that influence was. Paley is cited as head of the Materials Policy Commission in 1952. CBS is not mentioned. Hearst is mentioned briefly in connection with the Spanish-American War and in a sentence that declares that the assault on privacy and taste in the 1890s begun by Pulitzer was 'continued and intensified by his imitator, William Randolph Hearst.' Pulitzer is also mentioned as the father of a new school of journalists who reached the masses by making the news 'more sensational and vulgar.' Lippmann gets eight mentions, but who Lippmann is is not clear. Early on, he is described as an intellectual; later, in the 1960s, a commentator; later, as a critic of the Vietnam war, a foreign-policy expert. In every case, he is quoted as an articulate observer of the political or economic scene around him, but nowhere is he cited as a journalist, an influence on journalism, or a theorist of public communication. Murrow's one mention is similar. He is quoted as a critic of television's homogenizing influence on American life, but nothing is said of his journalism. Of the fifteen references to Franklin, only the first mentions his role as a journalist, almost parenthetically, noting that he gained success in everything he tried, 'whether it was running a Philadelphia newspaper in his youth or wooing the ladies of Paris in his old age.' As a printer, the text says, Franklin 'defended his right to publish what he pleased' but says nothing

of what that might have meant to Franklin or how that distinguished him, if it did, from others, nor how much his view was an expression of a belief in commercial liberty rather than political freedom. And Woodward and Bernstein? This is one of the most interesting citations. In the text, the Watergate break-in happens in June 1972; a grand jury indicts the burglars in September; the trial begins in February, and only then are Woodward and Bernstein described as 'meanwhile beginning to uncover sources in the executive branch, especially a mysterious and knowledgeable figure whom they identified only as Deep Throat.' By that time, Woodward and Bernstein's main Watergate work was behind them, and the *Washington Post's* courage in pursuing the Watergate story was already past. But it's hard to criticize a general textbook when you read Stanley Kutler's valuable new study of Watergate, *The Wars of Watergate*, which, however, in some 600 pages of text on Watergate, devotes but a few paragraphs to the news media. It mentions Woodward and Bernstein, but you won't find the names Katherine Graham or Benjamin Bradlee anywhere. The *Washington Post's* pursuit of the Watergate story is a small sidenote in Kutler's account.⁶

Why should journalism be so invisible in American historiography? When we are writing about the rise of a peculiarly democratic society, a nation that organized its politics through parties and its parties through newspapers for a century or more, when we are writing about a nation that at least rhetorically takes the First Amendment as its most distinctive Constitutional feature and the Constitution as its most distinctive political legacy, why, on this 300th anniversary of the American newspaper and on the eve of the 200th anniversary of the Bill of Rights, can we still write American history without American journalism?

The answer to this has to do, no doubt, with the way history writing is institutionalized in American universities, but it has also to do with the great gap between the character of communication

6. Stanley Kutler, *The Wars of Watergate* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990).

as a social function and the conventions of historiography. To borrow James Carey's useful distinction, we operate with two models of what communication is and how it works. The first is the transmission model that takes communication to be the transportation of ideas or information from a sender to a receiver. This is the dominant popular and academic concept. Alternatively, there is a ritual model that takes communication to be a social function of building solidarity and reaffirming common values within a community. Communication constitutes a community rather than transports a message.⁷ When the paper says what the mayor did yesterday, it transmits information. But in reporting what the mayor did yesterday, the newspaper also reaffirms the reader's connection to the city he or she lives in or lives near. In the transmission model, a medium of communication tells us what happened; in the ritual model, a medium of communication tells us who we are. I want to suggest that the transmission model of communication fits the presuppositions of history writing but in a way to guarantee the invisibility of the press. The ritual model of communication does not fit the epistemological or narrative conventions of historiography, but it is better suited for understanding the role that communication has played in our national past.

In the transmission model of communication, the press would have a place when it could be identified as the originator or exclusive or predominant disseminator of an idea or program or piece of information that affects what people think. The transmission model draws our attention to the press, if the press acts intentionally with clear consequences. The media may try to advocate, to mobilize, to organize. Even when they do, however, it is rarely possible to clearly identify the consequences of their actions. Even in Watergate, an argument can be made that Woodward and Bernstein and Graham and Bradlee were much less important to the discovery of wrongdoing than security guard Frank Wills, the

7. James Carey, *Communication as Culture* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

district police, Judge Sirica, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Justice, and the United States Senate. Most researchers today have pretty well given up the idea that the media are responsible for directly and intentionally indoctrinating the public. Communication scholars write less of direct influence than of agenda-setting, how the media help to shape not what people think but what they think about.⁸ Or they talk of priming, not what to think about but how to think about what we're thinking about. For example, during presidential elections, we know without media coaxing that we're supposed to think about evaluating the candidates, but the priming hypothesis suggests that the media 'prime' us to think more about economics than foreign policy, or more about foreign policy than economics, as a measure for evaluation of the rival figures.⁹ Or, more subtle still, the media tell us not what to think, not what to think about, not how to think about what we think about, but when to think about the things that we have on our minds anyway.¹⁰ The media are then cue-givers, telling us which of our lines that we already know comes next. It may be even that the media often do little more than re-present to us ideas and opinions we already have. This would seem to be insignificant—a kind of redundancy, but we should know that redundancy is functional, that the stories we tell ourselves and circulate among ourselves serve as reminders of who we are and what we're about, and that these stories, this culture, as a system of reminders, make a very big difference in what we do with and in our lives.

But at that point we have stepped from a transmission to a ritual model of communication. The 'representational' function of the press bridges these models. The media, in transmitting ideas au-

8. See Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs, *The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda Setting Function of the Press* (St. Paul: West, 1977), and a valuable critique in Michael Robinson, 'News Media Myths and Realities: What Network News Did and Didn't Do in the 1984 General Campaign,' in *Elections in America*, ed. Kay Lehman Schlozman (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), pp. 158-62.

9. Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder, *News That Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

10. I borrow this insight from an unpublished paper by Elliot King, graduate student in the Department of Sociology, University of California, San Diego.

thored by others, are voicing, if not authoring. They are, in the language of Mikhail Bakhtin, 'ventriloquating.' Even editorials seem normally to speak *for* as well as *to* some community of opinion; only rarely do they present a distinctive human voice. They express as much as direct a community. The newspapers transmit information when they tell us that a certain person died of AIDS. They express something about who we are when they adopt a new practice of saying 'He is survived by his companion.'

If we operate with the transmission model of communication, we have almost full assurance that the newspaper will be absent from general accounts of American history, because causal links in the study of communication are so hard to pin down. If we recognize the ritual rather than causal power of the media and put aside the cause-and-effect narrative of conventional history writing, we may come closer to the central role of the media in American life.

This is something I think Benjamin Franklin may have appreciated even when he was seeking to use the newspaper, transmission-style, to urge specific social change. He did not seek to make print do the work of politics. It would not mobilize. It would not convince. It would simply and importantly, as he put it, 'prepare the minds of the people.' So he wrote in his newspaper about the benefits of establishing a hospital for the poor in Philadelphia before undertaking solicitation for its support and before bargaining and politicking with members of the assembly for public subsidy to match private giving. He did not trust the newspaper to do everything but only to sow the seeds of support in the public.¹¹

The media are a central institution, one might even claim *the* central institution in the cultural construction of American nationhood and cityhoods and communityhoods across the land. The eighteenth-century newspapers were key instruments of commercial and, later, political integration. The nineteenth-century news-

11. Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography* (New York: New American Library, 1961), p. 133. Franklin did not confine himself to newspaper writing to 'prepare the minds of the people.' He uses the same phrase to refer to writing a paper for his literary club, the Junto, and circulating the paper to other clubs in the city, to advocate a reorganization of the night watch. He saw these actions as 'preparing the minds of people for the change' (p. 115).

papers were key instruments of urbanization, providing not only the advertising forum that made new institutions like department stores possible but also providing a community identity that held a city together when it was no longer a face-to-face community or even a 'walking city.' The newspaper industry in the mid to late nineteenth century, as Gunther Barth has put it, 'represented the response of one instrument of communication to a new market created by the longing of urban masses for identity.'¹² The newspaper helped provide that identity but, I would add, not only in metropolitan areas.

William Gilmore's wonderful study, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life*, is instructive about the role of the press in rural communities. Gilmore looks at reading habits in the Upper Connecticut River Valley from 1780 to 1835. There rural weekly newspapers promoted commercialization. Nearly all news of manufacturing that they provided was favorable, and a majority of the poems and letters and essays they printed about economic life breathed faith in manufacturing and commerce.¹³ Newspapers, along with other print media, helped to develop 'vastly increased involvement in public life' in the district Gilmore examines. In his view, the thickening network of print communication helped to promote and increase the value of 'the highly prized ideal of citizen awareness—defined by the speed, accuracy, regularity, and currency of one's knowledge about the world.'¹⁴

Gilmore argues that the spread of reading modernized and secularized citizenly knowledge. Modernization meant, among other things, 'greater acceptance of change as a normal part of daily life.' The weekly newspapers were instrumental in accommodating and naturalizing change and, no doubt, also with promoting 'a new-found ideal of intellectual currency' that 'imputed great value to "timeliness" and accuracy in information diffusion.'¹⁵

12. Gunther Barth, *City People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 59.

13. William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), p. 97.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 349. These generalizations do not flow directly from Gilmore's evidence but

At the same time, the newspaper press, among other print media, promoted regional, national, and international perspectives rather than localism or parochialism. Now this is a matter that, as Richard Kielbowicz tells us, was anything but simple or straightforward. European visitors were, as always, shocked at the spread of newspapers and believed that the newspapers 'divested' American rural dwellers of 'that air of ignorance and rusticity which characterize the greater part of the peasantry in Europe.'¹⁶ This no doubt ascribes too much to the media, but certainly it is impressive that a Lexington, Kentucky, coffeehouse in the first decade of the nineteenth century had files of forty-two newspapers that it maintained from around the country.¹⁷

In the 1830s, Jacksonians insisted on maintaining newspaper postage, while opponents sought to reduce or even abolish it. (Their efforts failed to pass the Senate in 1832 by a single vote.) The Jacksonians' aim was to prevent the widespread circulation of city papers beyond their city borders. The city papers sought rural subscribers and created special country editions; Greeley's *New York Tribune* had as many as a million readers spread across the country, and many rural editors blamed their own business problems on competition from the city press. ('All I used to know,' Will Rogers said on a lecture tour in 1925, playing off his famous aphorism, 'was just what I read in the papers. But that was when I was "Shanghaied" in New York, because all anybody knows in New York is just what they read in the papers. But now all I know is just what I see myself.' Of course, it's not so easy, then or now, to escape New York.)¹⁸

This very competition helped spur the rural papers to cover local affairs rather than to emphasize, as had been their wont,

seem to be conclusions Gilmore found inescapable from his immersion in the print culture of the period.

16. Quoted in Richard Kielbowicz, *News in the Mail: The Press, Post Office, and Public Information, 1700-1860s* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1989), p. 49.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

18. *Autobiography of Will Rogers*, ed. Donald Day (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), p. 118.

international, national, and state capital reports.¹⁹ But the desire for paragraphs of precious science from the cities could not be stifled. By midcentury, some papers began Pacific Coast editions, transported by steamship.²⁰ In a few cases, West Coast papers established steamer editions for Easterners such as the *Alta California for the Steamer* in 1849.²¹

In some cases, as David Paul Nord has observed, the newspaper was a kind of association in itself. Hundreds of religious, political, and other directly associational papers spoke intimately to the specific needs and interests of their constituent audiences. Even newspapers that sought a more general readership and proudly claimed, like James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald*, that they did not know and did not care to know their readers, established what Daniel Boorstin calls a 'consumption community,' a nonlocal and sometimes even nonregional association of people, a new cross-cutting loyalty in a society just learning to use the new powers of communication and transportation that the rotary press, the railroad, entrepreneurial capitalism, and the telegraph made possible.²²

These are the kinds of subtle community-building functions for which the press is truly effective, but they are very hard to see or to ascribe agency to. They shift our attention from what the newspaper does—what its effects on opinion or action are, to what the newspaper is—what kind of social function and literary or cultural outlook it portends.

What the newspaper is is not preordained by human nature or the nature of 'news' as a human cognitive or social category. Indeed, I tiptoe around the term 'news' to describe what appeared in colonial and early national papers for the good reason that this

19. Kielbowicz, *News in the Mail*, p. 63.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

22. On associational journalism, see David Paul Nord, 'Tocqueville, Garrison, and the Perfection of Journalism,' *Journalism History* 13 (1986): 56–64; on Bennett, see Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), p. 21; and on consumption communities, see Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973).

category was not the sum and substance, not even the primary purpose, of those journals. The first newspaper, whose beginnings we celebrate today, claimed that it would furnish readers monthly—oftener, only if ‘any Glut of Occurrences happen’—with a faithful account of ‘such considerable things as have arrived unto our Notice.’ Editor Benjamin Harris did not plan to report anything himself. He planned no affirmative action to newsgathering. That was not part of the plan, or anyone else’s plan, for about a century to come. He promised to provide notice of ‘Memorable Occurrences of Divine Providence’ and ‘Circumstances of Publique Affairs, both abroad and at home.’ But Mr. Harris neglected to get government approval for his sheet, and it was dead after one issue. The first paper to last any length of time was the *Boston News-Letter* published by John Campbell. Campbell, too, had a sense of his project quite different from our own sense of news. He saw his task as the recording of recent history. He wanted to keep his reports in chronological order, but because of little space and occasional suspension of publication, he could not print all the news he received from London. He got further and further behind. By 1718, he was printing news that was a year old, and he began to print more frequently to make up for this.²³ The idea of skipping to the most recent events did not occur to him. Nor, certainly, did he think to focus on local, rather than London, news. He got official sanction for each weekly issue before publication, but it is unlikely, given the paucity of local news in the paper, that there was anything that the local authorities could conceivably object to.²⁴

As for James Franklin’s *New-England Courant*, begun in 1721, it was as much a satirical send-up of its newspaper rivals as a newspaper as such, full of sham advertisements and ‘mock-serious attention to trivial subjects.’ Throughout its five-year run, it generally began with a literary essay, and Charles Clark has classified it,

23. Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

24. Charles Clark, “Metropolis” and “Province” in Eighteenth-Century Press Relations: The Case of Boston,’ *Journal of Newspaper and Periodical History* 5 (1989): 5.

and several other Boston papers that followed, as a 'literary newspaper,' whose primary feature was not news but a 'locally-produced piece of creative writing that served as the voice of the paper.'²⁵

The newspaper that Benjamin Franklin came to in Philadelphia in 1729, Samuel Keimer's *Pennsylvania Gazette*, took yet another view of newspaper production. The full title of Keimer's sheet was *The Universal Instructor in All Arts and Sciences and Pennsylvania Gazette*. This revealed Keimer's plan to print serially Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopaedia*, A through Z. Keimer's paper began in 1728 and when Franklin bought it in 1729, it was still on the A's, the entry for 'air' taking up almost the entire paper for two months running.

This hodgepodge of purposes and formats may seem an unlikely beginning for American newspaper history, but it did not stop there. Stephen Botein's analysis of colonial newspapers left him bewildered as to what these papers were up to. Their contents seemed a miscellany, and their assortment of news appeared to be far from anything that could possibly have been of interest to the colonists. Botein arrives at two possible explanations. One is that this was not secular news at all, but much as Benjamin Harris had suggested, news of Divine Providence. If you take world history in the eighteenth century to be a war of evil popery against good Christians, then what the American newspapers provided was 'an archaic geopolitical view of Protestants united in the face of their ancient enemy.'²⁶ But Botein offers this hypothesis rather diffidently, holding equally that 'exactly what view of the world colonial printers communicated to their neighbors by reprinting foreign news is difficult to specify.'²⁷ He is more confident in suggesting that printers operated by an economic rather than political logic in determining news content. In these terms, he

25. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

26. Stephen Botein, "Meer Mechanics" and an Open Press: The Business and Political Strategies of Colonial American Printers, *Perspectives in American History* 9 (1975): 196.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

argues, the object of news selection was incoherence. Printers sought to use particularly those news items to which no one would respond at all. The less interesting, the better—at least it caused no controversy. Avoiding controversy, not relaying what's the news, was the task of the colonial printer up to about 1765. But on the edge of breaking with England after the Stamp Act controversy, printers were compelled to choose sides. They did so, in most cases reluctantly, but they did so. From that point on, journalism became intensely political.

The newspaper, then, was at first a kind of periodical advertisement for the printer's trade, an entertainment, and certainly an updating of sorts, but it is hard to picture colonials in the first seventy-five years of the American newspaper rushing to the news office for knowledge of 'news.' Samuel Sewall, a regular newspaper reader early in the eighteenth century, almost never, as far as we can tell, got 'news' from his copy of the *Boston News-Letter*—he read the London papers directly, after all—but he used the *Boston News-Letter* as 'a reference source that recorded political texts such as royal and gubernatorial speeches and proclamations,' and he cites the paper as a reference in his diary and letters.²⁸ In the next seventy-five years, if we imagine people rushing to the printer's office, it would be for controversial views, not reliable news. Remember that colonial assemblies normally met in secret. When a newspaper in South Carolina printed an accurate report of the proceedings of the colony's assembly sent to it by an assembly member in 1773, the printer was thanked for his efforts with jailing. The Continental Congress and the Congress under the Articles of Confederation barred the press. 'Through the 1780s,' historian Thomas Leonard writes, 'when Americans found a speech in their newspapers it was more likely to have been made in the Parliament of the kingdom they had rejected than in the assemblies of the new nation they had joined.'²⁹ Congress, in its early days,

28. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power*, p. 38.

29. Thomas Leonard, *The Power of the Press* (New York: Oxford, 1986), p. 65. This whole paragraph relies on pp. 64–70 of his text.

was hostile to the press, the Senate meeting entirely in secret for its first six years. Congress did little to record its own debates before the 1820s and no newspaper outside Washington itself kept a correspondent in the capital until the new nation was a full generation old.

As for what the earliest Washington reporting was like, Leonard gives us a sardonic portrait of a world in which reporters took it as their duty to turn rough oratory into acceptable English. This was not pure invention, Leonard suggests, but 'rather a complex process of composition in which the leader and the reporter might share responsibility for the citizen's record of political discourse.' Politicians sat down with reporters to go over the reporter's notes and to improve upon their own views for the purposes of the printed record. It was also common practice for them to delay publication until the memory of what they actually had said would not jar too sharply or freshly with the printed record (which they would then make sure reached their constituents).³⁰

Journalism in the early nineteenth century, especially when given a push by the penny press, shifted from a miscellany of facts and fancy about strangers far from home, with practical information for doing business much less available than folklore, to a miscellany about one's own community, both its local manifestation and its wider connections. At that point, news became a kind of knowledge with a new standing and currency. At that point, news became an intimate part of citizenship and politics. At that point, news in newspapers became not the extension of gossip but an institutionalized, competitive marketplace commodity. It also became a public good, a collective and visible good, important in part precisely because it did not pass, like rumor, from person to person but, like divine instruction, from a printed text to hundreds of people at once.

William Gilmore writes of a new ideal of 'citizen awareness' that the newspapers helped spawn in rural New England in the

30. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

early nineteenth century and of the newly fashionable habit of 'keeping up with the world.' Did people before this time never care about what else was happening around the globe or beyond the reach of their own eyes and ears? Did they have no thirst for news? Contrary to common-sense assumptions, I think the answer to this is largely yes. This is not to say curiosity was a new feature of the human landscape. But it is to suggest that the availability of a product, in this case news in a newspaper, is as often the spur to a desire for it as is desire incentive for the marketing of a product. A British newsbook as early as 1548 announced that it would satisfy 'the thirsty desyer that all our kynde hath to know.'³¹ But I suspect the author expressed higher hopes for the widespread prevalence of that desire than he in fact discovered. The newspapers of the nineteenth century, in contrast, far from being vessels for a perennially desirable wine, were vintners of something new, a fermenting, modern, democratic popular culture.

In the nineteenth century, as reading the newspaper became a part of what it meant to be civilized in America, newspaper editors came to understand their social function as the provision of news. In 1869, when John Bigelow assumed the editorship of the *New York Times* (for a brief few months), about the same time British journalist Edward Dicey defined the American as a 'newspaper-reading animal,'³² he could still assert as something that needed saying that news had become the mainstay of the press. As he wrote in his maiden editorial, 'News as an element of interest in the Press has so far transcended all others since the construction of the telegraph that the force of a newspaper is now largely concentrated in that department.'³³

The 'consultative' process of speechifying in the antebellum period declined as printed records of proceedings became more available, but a new consultative process emerged that, in one form

31. Stephens, *A History of News*, p. 5.

32. Edward Dicey, *Spectator of America*, ed. Herbert Mitgang (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971), p. 29.

33. John Bigelow, *Retrospections of an Active Life*, 5 vols. (Garden City: Doubleday, Page, 1913), 4: 318. The editorial appeared in the *New York Times*, August 3, 1869.

or another, is with us yet. The new consultative process was called interviewing. It was not a common practice until the late nineteenth century. Indeed, it was not a known practice before the 1850s for a reporter to speak to a politician or other public figure to gather spontaneous comments on the record. When Horace Greeley interviewed Brigham Young in 1859, it was an odd enough situation that Greeley had to explain it to his readers. He provided a question and answer text and then added, 'Such is, as nearly as I can recall, the substance of nearly two hours of conversation, wherein much was said incidentally that would not be worth reporting, even if I could remember and reproduce it.'³⁴ When the practice began, it was not highly regarded. *The Nation* in 1869 attacked it as 'the joint product of some humbug of a hack politician and another humbug of a newspaper reporter.'³⁵ By the 1880s, the essentially American invention of the newspaper interview was spreading to Europe. A French writer criticized his countrymen who 'submit to the presence and indiscretion of certain foreign correspondents.'³⁶ American journalists were, in the early decades of this century, the first to interview the pope, the first to interview British cabinet officers, the first to interview German ministers.³⁷ In the United States, in contrast, the interview was by the 1890s so well established that in New York a political figure's refusal to be interviewed could become a news item itself.³⁸ By the 1930s, interviewing was a well-developed part of journalism, with reporters willing to offer advice on gamesmanship in getting interviews.

34. *New York Tribune*, August 20, 1859.

35. *The Nation*, January 26, 1869.

36. Paschal Grousset (pseud., Philippe Daryl), *Public Life in England* (London: George Routledge, 1881), p. 37.

37. On the pope, see Kevin J. O'Keefe, *A Thousand Deadlines* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1972), p. 76; on the German minister of marine, see *ibid.*, p. 73; on British Cabinet officers, see Forrest McDonald, *Insull* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 185. American industrialist Samuel Insull, an adviser to the British propaganda office in the United States beginning in 1914, was a key figure in encouraging the British to allow newspaper interviews with cabinet ministers. The *New York Journal* claimed (March 2, 1897) that the interview it had published the week before with Felix Faure, president of France, was the first time that the head of the French republic had granted an interview to a newspaper.

38. *New York Evening Post*, January 28, 1897 (story by Lincoln Steffens).

A famous European journalist cautioned against note-taking but a British journalism handbook advised that in the United States, 'the native heath of the interview,' taking notes was good practice because American public men 'are more willing victims to the interviewer than those over here, who generally are reserved and not very partial to publicity.'³⁹

The interview suggests several things about the American newspaper. First, it suggests a change in the standing of the journalist and the newspaper. An interview is a media event and calls attention to the interviewer as well as to the person interviewed. The reporter at the end of the nineteenth century was taking on new authority as interpreter of public life. This was marked not only by the rise of the interview but by the development in the straight news story of a summary lead rather than a chronological lead. The summary lead, much as we may take it for granted today, was a literary invention that asserted the journalist's authority to define for readers the most important elements of a news event.⁴⁰ The interview, of course, did this and more. It asserted the journalist's authority to construct a news event, to orchestrate an encounter and then to write it up as news. The institutionalization of interviewing also shows that, insofar as the newspaper is an agent of community morals and a form of cultural control, it was presenting a new model of human relations. It promoted a novel form of communication between interviewer and interviewee, in which the most important auditor, the public, was present only in the imagination. That imaginative construction of a public for whom the words of the interview were designed, helped construct and define the concept of the public itself.

Newspaper reporting, along with credit reporting and private detective work, was a new information-gathering profession that arose in the mid-nineteenth century as a specialized, systematic,

39. F. J. Mansfield, *The Complete Journalist* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman, 1935), pp. 85-86.

40. For a full discussion of the development of the summary lead, see Michael Schudson, 'The Politics of Narrative Form: The Emergence of News Conventions in Print and Journalism,' *Daedalus* 111 (1982): 97-112.

one-sided, and oddly amoral form of surveillance. That is, the relation of the interviewer to the interviewee is amoral. The interviewee, for the interviewer, is a means to an end and no more. Where newspaper reporting differs from private detective work is that the object of surveillance is a public person or a person in his or her public light and the client of the surveillance is not an individual but a readership, an entity with a plausible moral and political claim on us. Interviewers are accommodating readers to a certain set of expectations of privacy and publicity, of journalist as account-giver and accountant, of professionals as proxies, of irony as a mode of assertion. In this they also flatter the public, provide it an overinflated sense of its importance, encourage in leaders not only sensitivity to public opinion but sycophantic submission to popular prejudice. I do not propose that the new journalistic forms of the late nineteenth century were altogether progressive; I suggest simply that they were a vital, characteristic cultural invention and cultural force.

At least from the outside, it seems that the 'media' as we call it today or 'the press' as it is still sometimes known, is a source of danger, of foreign influence, of large and unaccountable risk. Today the complaint is that television leads our children to violence or our fellow citizens to submit to thirty-second demagoguery or makes us incapable of separating fact from fiction.⁴¹ Yesterday, a century ago, Charles Beard saw the newspaper press as a major cause of neurasthenic disease,⁴² and the Women's Christian Temperance Union of Iowa worried that 'the influences that today push young people down are intensified beyond those that our fathers and mothers confronted in a proportion corresponding to the increased speed of locomotion and communication, and to the

41. Richard Reeves suggests this last effect, holding that, when television was through with us, 'we would not be able to tell fact from fiction, we would not know what was real and what was true.' See Richard Reeves, *Jet Lag* (Kansas City: Andrews and McMeel, 1981), p. 127. This is a prominent theme in the work of Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

42. Charles Beard, *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences* (New York: G. P. Putnam's, 1881), p. vi.

vastly greater use of the press.' They worried that, 'in these rushing days of telephone and typewriter,' the barbarisms of the cities easily reached the secluded villages of Iowa. 'Indeed,' their report continued, 'we have no secluded places. Everywhere through these nerves of steel we feel the feverish pulse of the age.'⁴³ Three-quarters of a century earlier, Thomas Jefferson complained that truth itself became suspicious when printed in the newspaper. He believed that news accounts are not faithful records of world affairs. In fact, he pitied his fellow citizens who imagined that they learned something about their world by reading the papers, when 'the accounts they have read in newspapers are just as true a history of any other period of the world as of the present, except that the real names of the day are affixed to their fables.' He urged that a new organization of newspapers might be to divide the paper into four chapters—Truths, Probabilities, Possibilities, and Lies, and he feared only that the first of these chapters would be very short indeed.⁴⁴

But the newspaper is not only an outside force with its paragraphs of precious science as dangerous news. It is also very familiar to us. We throw it away easily. Like Mrs. Emerson, we, at least metaphorically, still put it under our pies. The eighteenth-century newspaper reader was, often enough, also a newspaper writer, and this was not uncommon for the associational press of the nineteenth century. Even in the metropolitan press, letters to the editor continued to occupy large chunks of newsprint. The country edition of the *New York Tribune* in the 1870s regularly devoted a page or more of its sixteen pages to agricultural correspondence, a kind of mass-mediated communal self-help column, with letters titled 'My Way with Manure' or 'Balky Horses' (January 30, 1878).

43. Report of Department of White Shield and White Cross, Women's Christian Temperance Union of Iowa, Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Meeting (October 1-4, 1889), p. 66.

44. Thomas Jefferson to John Norvell, June 11, 1807, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert E. Bergh, 20 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1905), 11: 222.

There was no Ann Landers intermediary—these were correspondents writing directly for publication for the benefit of other readers and correspondents. But the metropolitan press, as it became a more insistent, self-conscious, and lucrative big business, increased its distance from its readers. As the link between press and party weakened, the newspaper voice no longer presumed even a broad political agreement with its readers. More and more, the voice of the professional newspaper was separated out from the voice of the readers; where once the two were undifferentiated, they became sharply lined.

Even so, reading the newspaper, if not writing for it, remained, as David Paul Nord has put it, 'a form of active citizenship, a way to participate—in solitude perhaps, but a very communitarian solitude—in the on-going conversation of their community.'⁴⁵ But I don't want to let the romance of this phrase—the conversation of the community—prevent our recognizing how much the newspaper as it has come down to us is only vestigially conversational. There are still letters to the editor. It is still relatively easy for an ordinary citizen to write a letter, or even an article, for a local or community newspaper and see it in print. There are still columns, like 'Confidential Chat' in the *Boston Globe*, that have the same person-to-person character as the agricultural column of last century's *New York Tribune*. But the newspaper is today, and was to a large extent much earlier, distinctly not conversational, even anti-conversational. The shift from interpersonal communication to mass-mediated communication is not something to mourn but to understand. David Fischer has shown that the movement to popularly contested elections after 1800 was a development that Jeffersonians spearheaded and Federalists accepted only reluctantly. Older Federalists conceived the electoral process as a relatively private exercise and felt that the best electioneering was through

45. David Paul Nord, 'Readership as Citizenship in Late Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia' (paper presented at the Library of Congress conference on Publishing and Readership in Revolutionary France and America, May 1989), p. 27.

private letters rather than newspaper essays. Younger Federalists objected: 'They write private letters. To whom? To each other. But they do nothing to give a proper direction to the public mind. They observe, even in their conversation, a discreet circumspection generally, ill calculated to diffuse information, or prepare the mass of the people for the result.'⁴⁶

There's that useful verb again — preparing the people, here spoken with a less optimistic ring to it, preparing 'the mass of the people' in contrast to Franklin's preparing 'the minds of the people.' Our attitudes to the newspaper today probably represent about the same range of views—from the newspaper as propaganda to the newspaper as education and self-education; from the newspaper as directing to the newspaper as enabling; from the newspaper as business to the newspaper as watchdog and guardian; from the newspaper as disturbing outside influence and vested interest to the newspaper as essential, if imperfect, instrument of democratic self-government; and from the people as mass to be shaped to the people as minds to be informed.

'Few things that can happen to a nation are more important than the invention of a new form of verse,' wrote T. S. Eliot. And Jacob Bronowski, defending the sciences in a discussion of seventeenth-century science added that 'few things that can happen to the world are more important than the invention of a new form of prose.'⁴⁷ I would add to these propositions that few things are more characteristic and revealing of modern culture than the invention and changes in the ways it declares itself anew each day in its presentation of news. The world may be 'out there' as so many of us commonsensically believe. But no person and no instrument apprehends it directly. We turn nature to culture as we talk and write and narrate it. We humanize it, as Hannah Arendt said, but

46. James McHenry, writing on Oliver Wolcott, July 22, 1800, cited in David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 133-34, 361.

47. Jacob Bronowski, *Magic, Science, and Civilization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 49.

only in part do we humanize it in a general way. We grow up not only human but American, situated in a particular historical moment, and the ways we humanize speak to and speak of our time, our place, 1690 or 1790, 1890 or 1990. Nowhere is that speaking more evidently a preparation of the minds of the people than in the newspaper.

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