

Printing, Politics, and the People

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IT IS SURELY an ironic turn of fate that, to commemorate the three hundred fiftieth anniversary of printing in North America, the organizers of the James Russell Wiggins Lecture in the History of the Book should have chosen as your speaker an inhabitant of Williamsburg, Virginia—worse, a recent emigrant from Massachusetts, the seat of learning in seventeenth-century America, to the Puritan nemesis in the South. For back in 1671, the royal governor of Virginia, Sir William Berkeley, issued from Williamsburg a notorious manifesto against printing that violates the very spirit of the occasion we celebrate tonight. 'I thank God, *there are no free schools nor printing,*' Berkeley exulted, 'and I hope we shall not have these [for a] hundred years; for *learning* has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and *printing* has divulged them, and libels against the best government. God keep us from both!'¹

The governor's concern was understandable: from its invention in the fifteenth century, the printing press has intruded persis-

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1. William L. Joyce, David D. Hall, Richard D. Brown, and John B. Hench, eds., *Printing and Society in Early America* (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1983), p. 140.

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tently into affairs of state. Like the cassette tape of the twentieth century, the ingenious mechanism of Gutenberg has served as a dynamic agent of revolution, propagating the Reformation, putting the Bible in the hands of ordinary folk, challenging the power of bishops and kings. In Massachusetts Bay, it helped to constitute the body politic from the start. No sooner was the press assembled in Cambridge than it began turning out copies of the Freeman's Oath, the certificate of membership in the Puritan company of saints. That item was quickly followed by an almanac and a psalm book, essential guides in the 'wondrous' life of body and spirit. Directed to the needs of common people, rather than 'the great,' the printing press remade the traditional world of letters. It thus tokened a new organization of church and state.²

At a time when the ideal of an active, attentive citizenry seems to have vanished from our lives, it is easy to romanticize the role of the press in the emergence of an unprecedented political force—the public—in early America. Too easy. Even without that nursery of sedition, Governor Berkeley could not secure his rule; only five years after his complacent survey of a land without printers, he faced a large-scale, popular rebellion. Led by the prominent planter, Nathaniel Bacon, that uprising was spread by word of mouth, thanks to the many 'News Wives' who rode 'poste up and downe the Country,' telling 'hundreds' that the governor 'was a greater friend to the Indians than to the English.' On the other hand, for a half century, the printing press in Massachusetts Bay labored faithfully as an instrument of orthodoxy, perpetuating the rule of ministers and magistrates with hardly a slip. The custodians of the New England Way were no more eager than Governor Berkeley to hear the clattering of a free press. Just about three hundred years ago, on September 27, 1690, an English immigrant-bookseller, Benjamin Harris, launched in Boston the first newspaper to appear in the British colonies, *Publick Occurrences Both*

2. Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1979); David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), pp. 58–61.

Foreign and Domestick; it lasted a single issue. An anti-Catholic propagandist, who had fled the persecution of James II, Harris retailed seamy gossip about the 'immoralities' of the king of France and told embarrassing tales of wartime cruelties by England's Indian allies against the French. Furious at the unlicensed publication, the authorities of Massachusetts announced their 'high Resentment' and immediately closed it down. We thus observe tonight not only the birth of printing in North America three and a half centuries ago, but also the suppression of the first newspaper some fifty years later.³

The printing press was *political* from the beginning, bound up with issues of authority and the control of knowledge—as Natalie Davis, the historian of early modern France, reminded us in a classic essay, 'Printing and the People,' from which I have adapted my title.⁴ But it was more than historiography that provoked the theme. When John Hench asked for the topic of my Wiggins Lecture, it was in the dismal summer of 1988, amidst the debacle of the presidential campaign. Political discourse, it seemed, had reached the final degradation of the electronic age. Campaign slogans, once capable of stirring enthusiasm, were now slick, thirty-second ads, while speeches had become mere packages of words, designed to produce nifty 'sound bites.' Debates between candidates had congealed into frozen performances of pre-rehearsed lines; nobody took chances on camera. In this setting, I, like many other Americans, was inclined to nostalgia for the age of print: the printing press must have served the democratic pro-

3. Stephen Saunders Webb, *1676: The End of American Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), pp. 5, 20–21, 49; John Tebbel, 'Benjamin Harris,' Benjamin Franklin V, ed., *Boston Printers, Publishers, and Booksellers: 1640–1800* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), pp. 277–81; Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States through 260 Years: 1690 to 1950* (New York, 1950), pp. 9–10.

4. Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Printing and the People,' *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975), pp. 189–226. Cathy N. Davidson has recently reiterated the 'implicit political import' of the history of the book, which, in her view, centers on 'questions about the power and authority of the printed word.' See her 'Introduction: Toward a History of Books and Readers,' Cathy N. Davidson, ed., *Reading in America: Literature & Social History* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 5.

cess better than t.v.! Perhaps. But nostalgia must be resisted, especially among historians. No 'golden age' of politics has ever flourished in our past. The recent presidential campaign does, however, pose a striking challenge to the developing history of the book. Can this scholarship address issues of policy and inform our debates?⁵

The same question has recently been put by another student of books and reading in the past. 'As a citizen of an increasingly international electronic civilization and as an historian,' William Gilmore writes in the preface to his new book, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life*, 'I believe that the choices made—and those discarded—in the formation of modern civilization require serious analysis, aimed at gaining historical perspective and understanding and applying them to the choices presented by contemporary life. . . . We are in desperate need of the quality of historical wisdom previous generations of American leaders relied upon in comprehending the larger world and in formulating public policy.' A history of the book, heedless of such concerns, is 'a trivial pursuit.' It fails of the larger public purposes that inspired James Russell Wiggins's journalistic career.⁶

A single lecture can only begin to chart the changing relations between print and politics over the course of three and one half centuries. That story is barely known, for scholars have just started to explore the systems of communications by which Americans have acquired awareness of public affairs. The studies we do have are split up among numerous subfields—separate histories of business, journalism, literature, politics, and publishing, scattered across time and space, and seldom connected to one another. But this inquiry also faces a crucial problem that has surfaced in the new history of the book. The difficulty involves the two realms of

5. For a recent overview of the relationship between media and politics in the U.S., see Jeffrey D. Abramson, F. Christopher Arterton, and Gary R. Orren, *The Electronic Commonwealth: The Impact of the New Media Technologies in Democratic Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

6. William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780–1835* (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), p. xix.

culture and power. It is fashionable these days to argue that culture is inherently political, that the construction of symbols, the making of meanings, the fabrication of ideology—however we call it—marks, inevitably, an assertion of power, by which some individuals and groups assert superiority over others and thereby seize center-stage in social life. The point is familiar to scholars of early America, who probe a distant world, where elites staked claims to unified authority over society and state. In that setting, political contests could readily spill over into cultural conflicts, and vice versa. Hence, the tight control over the power of the press. But in the more diverse society of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the ties between culture and power loosened, and historians of each have gone separate ways. Studies of books and reading seldom attend, for example, to the party battles of the Jacksonian age, nor do recent accounts of democratic politics trace their implications for cultural life. In effect, our scholarship mirrors its subject: a unified society produces a holistic history; a segmented one is comprehended only in fragments. It is my purpose tonight to challenge that divide and to put politics back into the history of the book.

The problem I put before you—the disjunction between culture and power—simply did not exist in the Massachusetts of three hundred fifty years ago. There, ministers and magistrates governed in the certainty that the dissemination of the Word defined the very purpose of their wilderness venture. To that end they dedicated the new printing press in Cambridge. The Puritans aspired to build a ‘Printshop upon a Hill,’ to serve as the publishing center for an international Protestantism silenced by repression in the Old World. That ambition faded in 1641, after the English Revolution set the presses free and unleashed the tumultuous babble of opinions that caused American Puritans to tremble. Still, from Cambridge did flow occasional works, like the Bay Psalm Book, ‘the earliest literary production of the colonial press,’ to cross the ocean and become steady sellers in the mother country.

Far more important was the literary marketplace within New England, which the clergy nurtured with increasing assiduity. In its first decade, the Cambridge press yielded a mere ten imprints, but that figure soon rose to one hundred titles in the period 1655–72—an output of five or six books a year, including John Eliot’s Indian Bible, issued in an edition of 1,500 copies in 1660 and 1,000 more two years later.⁷

This expanding list of publications consisted largely of ‘devout and useful books,’ in Daniel Boorstin’s words, produced by an active corps of clerical authors. Ministers commandeered the press for their own works, issued in a great many forms. Naturally, they churned out sermons for all occasions—ordinations, elections, fast days, funerals, hangings; but they dominated other genres as well. They composed ‘godly almanacs,’ purged of saints’ days, astrology, and the ‘man of signs’; they wrote tales of notable piety and narratives of captivity among the Indians; they compiled instances of ‘remarkable providences’ in compendia of the *Wonders of the Invisible World*. All of these works were addressed to the same folk who regularly heard the preaching of the Word. Intensively cultivating their audience, the ministers left no soul unturned. With literacy widespread, perhaps nearly universal, even the poorest classes were encompassed in the world of print. There were no ‘dark corners of the land.’ Though the ministry was steeped in the humanist tradition of the classics, inaccessible to the vast majority of the people, it wielded the press to fashion a common culture of pious print.⁸

Maintaining authority was all the easier, given the practical arrangements for running the Cambridge shop. While printing fulfilled a fundamental, public purpose, it was a private enterprise from the start. Indeed, it began under the patronage of a wealthy

7. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, p. 24; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Puritan Pronaos: Studies in the Intellectual Life of New England in the Seventeenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1936), pp. 111–19; Lawrence C. Wroth, *The Colonial Printer* (1931; reprint, Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1964), pp. 17, 251.

8. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (1957; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1964), p. 297; Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, pp. 21–61; Morison, *Puritan Pronaos*, pp. 40–53.

English clergyman, the Reverend Jose Glover, who personally bought the press and type and hired the mechanics to work them. Glover died en route to New England, but his widow carried on the vision, purchasing the house in Cambridge where the printers set up shop. Later, the press would be moved, when Mary Glover remarried: to the official residence of Henry Dunster, the president of Harvard. Throughout its life, it remained under strict clerical control, reinforced by an official board of censors, appointed by the General Court. Certainly, the printers barely influenced its contents. The first workman, Matthew Daye, was a semi-skilled English youth, not yet out of his apprenticeship in the craft. Breaking his indenture to come to New England, Daye was the first 'halfway journeyman' in American printing history. And he succeeded little better than the many restive young printers who would follow a similar course in succeeding centuries. Though he obtained his own house and land in Cambridge, Daye never possessed his press or shop. He was a dependent laborer, first and last. So, too, was his successor, Samuel Green, a man of some status and means, who agreed to learn the 'Art and Myserie of Printing' as a public service. By this route, Green became the progenitor of a colonial dynasty of printers, but he never owned the tools of his trade. It was not until after 1675, when the General Court allowed an expansion of printing to Boston, that a few printer-proprietors set up shop. Ironically, at its origin in New England, printing assumed the very forms that were its destiny under the modern capitalism of the nineteenth century: the separation of the editorial function from the mechanical work and the reliance upon semi-skilled laborers, who constituted a permanent, subordinate class.⁹

It is difficult, under these political and economic circumstances, to expect any real independence from the managers of the press. Occasionally, the clerics in Cambridge did become too 'liberal' for the magistrates in Boston—as when they approved publication of Thomas a Kempis's devotional manual, *Imitation of Christ*, only to

9. George Emory Littlefield, *The Early Massachusetts Press, 1638-1711*, 2 vols. (Boston: Club of Odd Volumes, 1907), 1: 19-58, 91, 131-53, 191-206.

see the General Court ban the 'Popish' book. But such disputes were few. The largest constraint upon publishing derived from the everyday milieu. For all the uses of print, colonial Massachusetts remained an oral culture, dependent upon word of mouth for its most important communications. The General Court 'published' its proclamations by crying them out in the streets, to the 'Beat of Drum and Sound of Trumpet.' It continued the practice even after a newspaper began to publish 'by Authority' in Boston. Public news thus traveled invariably from top down—from local notables to common folk in a pattern of 'hierarchical diffusion' that has just been splendidly documented in Richard Brown's new book, *Knowledge Is Power*. As Brown demonstrates, elite figures like Samuel Sewall took personal responsibility for public information. Rumors of war, reports of pirates, accounts of deaths: such news came constantly to Sewall, as part of his official role, and he carefully screened the stories before passing them on to his peers. Seldom did he talk to social inferiors, except to give orders or to learn their news. To be a gentleman in Boston was to act as a gazette, through which knowledge of the public world was channeled among the people—with careful deference to status. Indeed, well into the eighteenth century, newspapers in Boston were designed to extend the reach of the elite. Offering foreign intelligence, public documents, literary essays, and shipping news, they communicated a cosmopolitan culture. Local stories were slighted, and when such items did see print, they were reported without 'context.' In the intimate, personalized world of the colonial city, people possessed the local knowledge to read between the lines. 'Providing that background and fitting the pieces together,' writes Charles Clark, 'was still a function of the oral culture, not the public prints.'¹⁰

10. Morison, *Puritan Pranaos*, pp. 119–20; Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700–1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 16–41; Charles E. Clark, 'The Public Prints: The Origins of the Anglo-American Newspaper, 1665–1750' (unpublished manuscript, 1987), ch. 9, p. 47. (I am grateful to Professor Clark for generously sharing with me his important work on the early American newspaper.) For a similar view of the colonial newspaper as a genteel organ of cosmopolitan

By the time the first newspaper, the *Boston News-Letter*, was allowed to publish regularly, beginning under Postmaster John Campbell in January 1704, Massachusetts had developed a more varied and vigorous world of print. The magistrates had, of course, never been able to seal off the colony from dissent, especially since they were obliged to struggle among themselves to impose the New England Way. The ferocity of their fight against Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomians was itself a measure of the ideological ruptures within the Puritan settlement. Battling radical sectarians on one side and resisting the encroachments of a bawdy, Elizabethan culture on the other, the rulers of the Bay employed the press as a weapon of consensus. In public, disputing magistrates closed ranks. But the censors of the press could not stop a thriving book trade, run by private merchants, which made alternatives to orthodoxy—romances, jestbooks, bawdy ballads—available after mid-century. Nor could they check the competitive drive among authors and printers, once they allowed more than one press to run at a time. In the late 1670s, as David Hall observes, almanacs written by Harvard graduates were featuring the zodiac and the ‘man of signs.’ By the turn of the century, Boston had its own Grub Street, bidding to capture the market for wonders, chivalry, and hangings. The clerical hold on public discourse was no more.¹¹

To tell the story of books and printing in seventeenth-century Massachusetts is thus to convey, in fresh perspective, an ultimately familiar tale: the rise and fall of ‘orthodoxy in Massachusetts.’ What else could we expect? Given its public role in a small, inclusive society, the world of print was bound to reflect the ideological

information, see Robert M. Weir, ‘The Role of the Newspaper Press in the Southern Colonies on the Eve of the Revolution,’ Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench, eds., *The Press and the American Revolution* (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1980), pp. 131–37.

11. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, pp. 57–70, 182–85; Brown, *Knowledge Is Power*, pp. 39–41; Janice Lynn Knight ‘A Garden Enclosed: The Tradition of Heart Piety in Puritan New England,’ (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1989); Clark, ‘Public Prints,’ ch. 7; Thomas C. Leonard, *The Power of the Press: The Birth of American Political Reporting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 13–32.

contests of its day. Although magistrates and ministers waged many battles behind closed doors, the conflicts of society did impose their presence in cold type. Printing was *always* political. For early America, the history of books is no specialized realm; it immediately launches us into the collective life of a people, where in the end, culture and power were joined.

To leap across the centuries from Puritan New England to Jacksonian America is to experience perhaps the same future shock that overwhelmed the French aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville, on his arrival in this country in 1831. Anticipating an orderly republic, marked by popular virtue and deference to rulers, Tocqueville became an astonished witness at the creation of mass politics in a democratic, capitalist state. Modern political parties were taking shape under Democrats and Whigs, sparking an enthusiasm among voters that was sustained for decades, long after Jackson and Clay were gone. Modern publishing was emerging at the same time and in similar ways. Just as the parties gathered up millions of citizens into a competitive, national system, so the entrepreneurs of the press discovered a vast audience for reading and fought to control an expansive, continental marketplace. The era 1825–50 marked the ‘golden age of periodicals’ and the rise of book empires in Boston and New York. Most of all, it culminated the triumph of the newspaper as democracy’s favorite medium of print. The press, Tocqueville perceived, ‘causes political life to circulate through all the parts of that vast territory. Its eye is constantly open to detect the secret springs of political designs and to summon the leaders of all parties in turn to the bar of public opinion. It rallies the interest of the community round certain principles and draws up the creed of every party; for it affords a means of intercourse between those who hear and address each other without ever coming into immediate contact.’¹²

12. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Phillips Bradley, 2 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945), 1: 15, 195; Sean Wilentz, ‘Many Democracies: On Tocqueville and Jacksonian America,’ in Abraham S. Eisenstadt, ed., *Reconsidering Tocqueville’s Democ-*

Yet, a striking problem arises when we probe more deeply into the links between politics and print. In the pages of the newspaper, the din of party is commonly heard, and its echoes resound through the magazines. But in the world of books, the controversies of the day are notably absent. Consider, for example, the big sellers of the era. Novels led the lists, followed by travels, biographies, and histories. Fiction, of course, need not shun politics, as major writers of the early republic — Hugh Henry Brackenridge, for one; Hannah Foster, for another — readily demonstrated. But in the antebellum period, politically engaged writers, like Hawthorne and Melville, addressed partisan issues obliquely, in subversive, literary codes, accessible only to insiders or close readers. Alternatively, they raised contemporary debates into universal questions of human nature. Even the exceptions prove the rule: Cooper alienated readers when he turned from the Leatherstocking saga to bitter satires of scheming politicians and their editorial hacks. By contrast, Harriet Beecher Stowe's antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, first created a sensation in the newspapers, before it ever became a book, while Hinton Rowan Helper's *Impending Crisis of the South* gained national fame only through the aegis of the Republican Party, which bought up thousands of copies for the 1860 campaign and distributed them free.¹³

As today, so in the mid-nineteenth century: most political books

racy in America (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1988), pp. 213–20; John Tebbel, *A History of Book Publishing in the United States*, 4 vols. (New York and London: R. R. Bowker, 1972), pp. 213–30; William Charvat, *Literary Publishing in America, 1790–1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1959), pp. 17–37; Ronald J. Zboray, 'Antebellum Reading and the Ironies of Technological Innovation,' Davidson, ed., *Reading in America*, pp. 191–94; Mott, *American Journalism*, pp. 215–64; Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), pp. 12–60; Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, 5 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1930–68), 1: 339–91 (quotation, p. 341).

13. Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), pp. 49–54, 165–71; James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950); Cathy N. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 125–211; David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), pp. 113–65; Stephen Nissenbaum, 'The Firing of Nathaniel Hawthorne,' *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 114 (1978): 57–86.

gained limited sales. The social libraries, dedicated to 'the diffusion of useful knowledge,' seldom bought them. Private individuals either passed them by or discarded them quickly. It is possible that such decisions reflected only a literary division of labor, whereby people got their politics from the papers and looked for something else — entertainment, information, moral uplift — from books. But that is not the whole story. Other cultural agencies also evaded politics. Currier & Ives produced numerous lithographs on all sorts of American scenes but hardly any about political life. As for the stage, partisan issues got only 'glancing' reference. Theater-goers wanted melodrama and comedy, not more debate. Not until the Progressive Era would dramatists find inspiration in the controversies of the day. Tocqueville thought politics 'the only pleasure an American knows,' but he was evidently mistaken. In the mid-nineteenth century, Americans enjoyed certain forms of culture precisely because they excluded political life.¹⁴

Meanwhile, newspapers not only reveled in politics but expanded their concerns, so as to represent the entire panorama of a teeming society. The vast majority were, of course, blatant organs of party, sponsored by state juntas and regencies to push their views and get out the vote. Intensely combative, the party press waged war against rivals, in abusive, personalized campaigns remarkable for rhetorical excess. But when the electioneering season ended, the combatants could drop the partisan weapons and become mild 'miscellanies' of belles lettres, commercial 'intelligence,' and agricultural reform. As Frances Trollope perceived during her sojourn in Cincinnati, 'Every *American newspaper* is more or less a magazine.' By the early 1830s, country weeklies in the North were reaching the vast majority of their locale. In the

14. Jesse H. Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library: The Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England, 1629-1855* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949); Robert A. Gross, 'Much Instruction from Little Reading: Books and Libraries in Thoreau's Concord,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 97 (1988): 142; Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life*, p. 209; William Douglas Boyd, Jr., 'Books for Young Businessmen: Mercantile Libraries in the United States, 1820-1865' (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1975), pp. 121-26; Leonard, *Power of the Press*, pp. 97-101, 243, n. 31; Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 1: 260.

cities, the daily 'advertisers' attracted a narrower clientele. For six dollars a year, paid in advance, these papers supplied business and political news to urban elites. But the growth of the penny press, from the 1830s on, changed all that. Catering to the great mass of middling and working people, papers like James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald* and Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* wrought 'a revolution in communications.' Hawked in single copies by newsboys on the streets, the penny papers attracted readers with their colorful accounts of urban life. As in the tabloids today, crime, sex, Wall Street, and celebrities dominated the news. Politics remained in most penny papers, but no longer in a privileged place or in the same form; partisan editorials gave way to political reporting. Coverage of culture altered, too: papers like the *Tribune* took pride in current reviews of books, theater, and ideas. Even the ads were different. Once staid listings of dry goods and real estate, they now sold a dazzling array of items—especially books, plays, patent medicines, and abortion services—in displays designed to catch the eye. In all these ways, the new urban dailies captured a mass audience, numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Together, the party papers and the penny press became the journalistic crossroads of America, reflecting society to itself.¹⁵

Apolitical books on one side, a politically vital press on the other: how do we account for the divide within the mid-nineteenth-century world of print? Certainly, the public-mindedness of news-

15. Mott, *American Journalism*, pp. 215–64; John Charles Nerone, 'The Press and Popular Culture in the Early Republic: Cincinnati, 1793–1848' (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 1982), pp. 1–2; Milton W. Hamilton, *The Country Printer: New York State, 1785–1830* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), pp. 139–66; Schudson, *Discovering the News*, pp. 14–31; Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865–1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 14–22. The accomplishments of the penny press in enlivening and commercializing journalism may well be exaggerated. Andrew Robertson has recently shown that in the era of Federalist-Jeffersonian competition, partisan papers were already adopting the latest innovations in advertising and selling candidates like any other product. At the same time, after a close scrutiny of the press in Cincinnati, John Nerone has argued that the penny press did not radically expand the audience for newspapers or alter the substance of journalism. His study needs to be replicated for other places. See Andrew W. Robertson, 'Commerce, Politics, and the Hortatory Style of Language' (paper, the Society for Historians of the Early Republic, Philadelphia, July 17, 1987), and Nerone, 'The Press and Popular Culture.'

papers was nothing new. It continued an affinity between government and press that was present in Benjamin Harris's *Publick Occurrences* of 1690, became a fixed part of the conservative, colonial newspaper, and only deepened in the course of the Age of Revolution, when printers threw caution to the winds and took sides in the successive struggles between Loyalists and Patriots, champions and opponents of the Constitution, Federalists and Republicans. No, it was books that changed, losing the political relevance of the 1790s, when Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* had produced volumes of polemics and prompted fearful conservatives to found social libraries in defense of the status quo.

The divergent course of newspapers and books derived in part from public policy. Almost as soon as the federal government started up, it fostered the expansion of the press. Under the Postal Acts of the 1790s, newspapers circulated throughout the country at cheap rates, and editors exchanged papers for free. Books were banned from the mailbags. Only in the mid-1840s, when clever publishers seized upon a loophole in the laws and began pirating foreign novels in huge 'story papers,' did books—or rather, their facsimiles—move in great quantities through the mail. That practice was soon put to a halt. Government dispensed other favors, including lucrative contracts to print the laws. Public patronage from state legislators provided a good living: in 1830, the official printer of New York made \$5,000 a year for printing legal notices. Federalists and Republicans, Democrats and Whigs fought over banks, tariffs, and internal improvements, but on the value of subsidizing the press, they were in remarkable accord.¹⁶

Ironically, the consensus had originally emerged out of two opposing world views. Back in the 1780s and 1790s, Federalists had sponsored the press as an instrument of social order. Through

16. Richard Kielbowicz, 'News in the Mails, 1690–1865: The Technology, Policy, and Politics of a Communication Channel' (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1984), pp. 82–106; Richard Rodda John, Jr., 'Managing the Mails: The Postal System, Public Policy, and American Political Culture, 1823–1836' (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1989), pp. 2–51; Tebbel, *History of Book Publishing*, 1: 242–44; Culver H. Smith, *The Press, Politics, and Patronage: The American Government's Use of Newspapers, 1789–1875* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1977); Hamilton, *Country Printer*, pp. 61–65, 117–35.

a network of 'well-conducted' newspapers, they aspired to disseminate 'correct principles' and information to leading gentlemen in the states, who would carry the civics lessons in person to their 'ignorant' neighbors. 'I am *sure* the mass of Citizens in the United States *mean well*,' George Washington allowed, 'and I firmly believe they will always *act well* whenever they can obtain a right understanding of matters.' A century after Samuel Sewall, the Federalist elite still envisioned society as a vertical communications chain. The Republicans were far more egalitarian, but for that reason, even more attached to the press. Affirming an Enlightenment ideal of knowledge, they deemed newspapers essential to the cause of liberty and truth. Without informed public opinion, the citizens could not protect their rights. On that basis, in the first Congress, James Madison advocated national communications as the safeguard of freedom in the new republic. 'Whatever facilitates a general intercourse of sentiments,' he wrote in the *National Gazette* in 1791, 'as good roads, domestic commerce, a free press, and particularly *a circulation of newspapers through the entire body of the people, and Representatives going from, and returning among every part of them*, is equivalent to a contraction of territorial limits, and is favorable to liberty.' That was a rationale for post roads and mail subsidies on which the federal government could easily proceed.¹⁷

Where newspapers won public favors, the book industry petitioned for help in vain. Government, to be sure, did pass copyright laws to aid American authors but did little to advance the larger cause of national literature. A diplomatic post here, a customs office there: such patronage hardly offset Congressional refusal to recognize international copyright and thereby to stem the flow of cheap, foreign reprints, underselling American texts. Committed

17. Kielbowicz, 'News in the Mails,' pp. 82-95, 127-28; Richard D. Birdsall, *Berkshire County: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), pp. 180-81; Robert H. Wiebe, *The Opening of American Society: From the Adoption of the Constitution to the Eve of Disunion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), pp. 35-66 (quotation from Washington, p. 38); James Madison, 'Public Opinion,' *Papers of James Madison*, ed. William T. Hutchinson and William M. E. Rachal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962-), 6: 70.

to free trade in ideas, Congress was quick to acknowledge rights in literary property, but offered no protection against competition from abroad. The very policy that lay behind aid to newspapers—commitment to the easy dissemination of public knowledge—cut against the interests of aspiring authors of books.¹⁸

But the hegemony of newspapers was never complete. Even when Federalists and Jeffersonians were cheerfully cooperating to subsidize the press, a few alienated intellectuals, like the Reverend Samuel Miller, president of Princeton, railed at journalistic excesses. As outlets for selfish politicians 'to defame their personal and political enemies,' newspapers reeked of 'the foul ebullitions of prejudice and malice.' Unless they were purged, Miller warned, the republic would face 'a crisis in which we must yield either to an abridgement of the liberty of the press, or to a disruption of every social bond.' But in the wake of the disastrous Alien and Sedition Acts, government controls over newspapers were doomed. Instead, critics would have to bring about voluntary reform of the communications system. Their efforts determined the different directions of books and newspapers in American culture. In the early nineteenth century, as part of the temperance crusade, moral reformers repeatedly urged men to shun the tavern—once the community newsroom—and get the latest knowledge from the press. Rather than haunt the barroom, husbands and fathers should be reading a newspaper by the hearth. 'How many are there who do not even read a newspaper,' the *New England Farmer* complained. 'They have not the time, and cannot afford the expense! Yet they can idle any two or three hours in a day, and spend the price of half a dozen newspapers, or a share in the public library, for rum to run down their necks.' But that counsel backfired. Moralists were soon aghast at the virulent politics of the party press and at the licentious tone of the penny papers. The health reformer William Alcott could recommend piles of books and magazines to

18. Richard Kielbowicz, 'Mere Merchandise or Vessels of Culture?: Books in the Mail, 1792–1942,' *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 82 (1988): 169–200.

young husbands and wives, but he puzzled over the problem of newspapers. For a man to perform the duties of a citizen, Alcott acknowledged, he had to keep up with a political paper. But what sort was suitable for the home? Sadly, very few were 'morally unexceptionable,' owing to their party spirit, lurid accounts of crime, and prurient ads. 'Many family papers admit for money . . . the most vitiating advertisements which could possibly be introduced. There is no vice nor crime which the open and unwary youth — not to say the more wary adult — could not learn from the perpetual detail of their pages.' Alcott had no answer to the dilemma. Beyond offering stern warning, he could only look forward to the day when the power of the press would be 'safely exercised by millennial Christians.'¹⁹

But other conservatives were less patient and set about creating a sanctuary of culture, safe from the political storms. Employing the techniques of the temperance movement, they promoted a world of 'rational recreation,' centered around libraries and lyceums. Within the Greek Revival setting of the Providence Athenaeum, Brown University president Francis Wayland hoped, young men would be released from 'the domination of the senses,' the 'fascinations of refined self-gratification,' and 'the bitterness of party rancor.' In this spirit, the leading urban public libraries were built as temples of learning, pointedly set apart from their surround. Lyceums would also be antidotes to the 'poison of party.' Begun as local debating clubs, they aimed to provide a noncontroversial forum for the discussion of public issues. By the 1850s, they furnished famous literary figures a lofty platform, from which to preach self-culture and interpret the progress of the age. 'The Lyceum,' Ralph Waldo Emerson predicted in 1843, 'will be the church of future times. Here only can one find a convertible audience—who are, as a body, unpledged to any one system, and

19. Samuel Miller, *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols. (New York: T. & J. Swords, 1803), pp. 252–55; *Concord Yeoman's Gazette*, January 27, 1827; William A. Alcott, *The Young Husband, or Duties of Man in the Marriage Relation* (1841; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1972), pp. 190–93.

unapprized of what is to be said. It is the most elastic and capacious theatre of our times.²⁰

The movement for a pure, nonpartisan world of letters may explain why books so often connote high culture in American life—as opposed to the promiscuous, popular culture of the press. One must add, of course, their higher price, their relative inaccessibility, and their association with women and leisure. In the nineteenth century, books brought genteel men and women together, newspapers drove them apart. To judge from female reformers, many husbands returned home from long hours at work, only to bury themselves in a newspaper before rushing out to an evening caucus. It was William Alcott's aim to restore marriages through common reading of books. In this light, it is understandable that the major figures of the nineteenth-century literary canon took a detached, elevated tone, rising above the sordid concerns of business and politics, or engaging them only metaphorically. Even as they absorbed images and ideas from the penny press, they adapted to the gendered expectations of their audience.²¹

How, in turn, do we comprehend the distinctive elements—the broad compass, the impassioned, personal tone—of the press? One answer may lie in the concrete circumstances of journalistic work. Michael Schudson has suggested that the rapid changes of the era—particularly, the heightened diversity and fluidity of the capitalist city—provoked new modes of mapping the social world. 'With the growth of cities and commerce,' he writes, 'everyday life acquired a density and a fascination quite new, "society" was pal-

20. John S. Gilkeson, Jr., *Middle-Class Providence, 1820-1940* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 61-85 (quotations, pp. 81, 83-84); Birdsall, *Berkshire County*, pp. 166-73; Donald Scott, 'The Popular Lecture and the Creation of a Public in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,' *Journal of American History* 66 (1980): 791-809; Neil Harris, 'Cultural Institutions and American Modernization,' Donald G. Davis, Jr., ed., *Libraries and Culture: Proceedings of Library History Seminar VI* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 28-47.

21. Zboray, 'Antebellum Reading,' pp. 190-91, 196; Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), pp. 80-88, 227-56; David Brion Davis, ed., *Antebellum American Culture: An Interpretive Anthology* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1979), p. 94; Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women or Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), pp. 429-31; Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, pp. 171-81, 240-41, 255-57.

pable as never before, and the newspapers—especially the penny papers—were both agent and expression of this change.' Indeed, in the course of the communications revolution, the press became a microcosm of the new social order. Newspapers developed into large, heavily capitalized enterprises, with elaborate divisions of labor. The brief, journalistic reign of the single man—printer, proprietor, and editor—lasted only from the mid-eighteenth century to the rise of the party press. Then the printing office reverted to the plan on which it had started in Cambridge two centuries before. A single patron, a little group of gentlemen, sometimes, a joint-share corporation owned the business; hired editors, increasingly, college-trained writers or lawyers, ran the paper; and a transient, semiskilled labor force did the practical work at the case and the press. Numerous 'half-way journeymen'—essentially, cheap, teenage labor—swamped the composing rooms, while steam-operated presses at the penny papers were tended by women and children, plus a few men trained in the craft. In the 1850s, the *New-York Tribune* had about two hundred employees, more than half of them full-time; it drew on the services of eighteen foreign and twenty domestic correspondents, whose work was overseen by a dozen editors. Despite their greater scale, newspapers remained precarious operations, dependent on credit and subject to the ups and downs of the economic cycle. Partnerships were short-lived; business failures commonplace. No wonder political editors clung to party patronage for security! Still, even they were likely to represent in the papers the diverse, changing world they saw around them every day at work.²²

22. Schudson, *Discovering the News*, p. 30; Stephen Botein, 'Printers and the American Revolution,' Bailyn and Hench, eds., *Press and the American Revolution*, pp. 49–53; W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice: From Franklin to the Machine Age in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 76–96, 146–56; Bruce Laurie, *Working People of Philadelphia, 1800–1850* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), pp. 14–20, 185–87; Howard B. Rock, *Artisans of the New Republic: The Tradesmen of New York City in the Age of Jefferson* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), pp. 239–41, 248–50, 265–71; William Stanley Pretzer, 'The Printers of Washington, D.C., 1800–1880: Work Culture, Technology, and Trade Unionism' (Ph.D. diss., Northern Illinois University, 1986); Nerone, 'The Press and Popular Culture,' pp. 163–64; Glyndon G. Van Deusen, *Horace Greeley: Nineteenth-Century Crusader* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1953), pp.

Paradoxically, the more impersonal structure of the newspaper office may explain the intense, personal style of the editors. Doubtless in reaction against the unsettling changes of the era, Jacksonian popular culture celebrated the lone individual, who imposed an indomitable will on his surroundings. Andrew Jackson himself was one such figure, but so, too, were the master criminals, whose grisly exploits captivated the press. Objects of similar acclaim, the editors Bennett and Greeley impressed their self-promoting personalities on everything they touched. Aggressive self-assertion demonstrated manliness in an unfamiliar, impersonal world. But this American studies argument misses the more immediate, vocational sources of the shrill editorial voice. The truth is that for all their bravado in print and their fights in the streets, most editors had to endure a humiliating dependence upon their party bosses. In Sag Harbor, Long Island, the departing editor of the *Suffolk County Recorder* disclosed the personal cost of such arrangements in a parting shot at his employers. Upon taking the post, Samuel A. Seabury recalled, he was obliged to surrender 'the sole direction of the paper' to his sponsors and to pledge, in advance, to print nothing except ads 'without their consent.' His pride bristled at the condition, but his hunger mattered more. 'My sensibility led me to be fearful of the consequences of not signing it.' Seabury comforted himself by resolving to keep his promise, 'as long as I found it for my interest.' That wasn't for long. After his patrons complained about the heavy dose of religion Seabury put in the paper—'They expected such domestic, political, and foreign news as was common for newspapers to make known'—it was time to call it quits. 'It was no longer to my interest,' the pious Seabury succinctly explained, 'but much against it, to adhere' to the contract.²³

130–32; Gary John Kornblith, 'From Artisans to Businessmen: Master Mechanics in New England, 1780–1850' (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1983), pp. 260–85.

23. John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955); Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*, pp. 175–81; Daniel A. Cohen, 'Pillars of Salt: The Transformation of New England Crime Literature, 1670–1860' (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1988), chs. 9, 10; Hamilton, *Country Printer*, pp. 180–81.

The experience of Seabury hints why party editors were so obsessed with defending their honor: in a culture that prized independence, they forfeited a good deal of self-respect as they went about their daily work. And, like Thoreau's chanticleer, they compensated by bragging upon the editorial roost. In this perspective, we may also glimpse the personal origins of the penny press. Before setting out on an independent course, both Bennett and Greeley had labored long and hard in their parties' service. But neither was getting anywhere fast. Like the emerging professional authors, who were seizing upon the expanding literary marketplace to stand out on their own, the founders of the *Herald* and *Tribune* threw off the shackles of party patronage and emancipated themselves. 'My leading idea,' Greeley explained, 'was the establishment of a journal removed alike from servile partisanship on the one hand and from gagged, mincing neutrality on the other.' In Greeley's buoyant vision, the *Tribune* would be 'the GREAT MORAL NEWSPAPER,' unveiling the mysteries behind the shifting course of events. Ralph Waldo Emerson once observed that Greeley did 'all the thinking and theory' for farmers 'at two dollars a year.' The Concord Sage shrewdly discerned a fellow traveler. Like the Transcendentalist, Greeley offered a guide to the 'signs of the times,' and found his own voice in the process.²⁴

But it was not so simple, either for Greeley or for the readers, who depended on the *Tribune* and other penny papers for their knowledge of public affairs. Crime, sex, and patent medicine ads ran in his paper far more often than Greeley cared to admit. And the personalizing style—the legacy of Bennett's and Greeley's years with the party press—continued to govern their approach to politics. Though superior to party editors, who distorted facts with abandon and sold candidates with all the honesty of a horse

24. Horace Greeley, *Recollections of a Busy Life*, 2 vols. (1873; reprint, Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1971), 1: 137, 142; James L. Crouthamel, *Bennet's NEW YORK HERALD and the Rise of the Popular Press* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1989), pp. 5–42; Hamilton, *County Printer*, pp. 181–207; R. Jackson Wilson, *Figures of Speech: American Writers and the Literary Marketplace, from Benjamin Franklin to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).

trader, the penny papers could themselves play fast and loose with the news. Nor were they above the resort to insult and prejudice in interpreting events. In the gathering crisis of the Civil War, Greeley's *Tribune* pilloried the South from within the unquestioned framework of 'free soil, free labor, free men.' A more cynical strategy was employed by *Harper's Weekly* and the *New York Times* in their crusade to bring down the Tweed Ring. Caricaturing Tweed's henchmen as Irish apes—actually, they were a WASP gang of thieves—and employing the manipulative methods of melodrama, the press confirmed the preconceptions of its middle-class audience. Fittingly, the mass-circulation newspapers were made possible by the invention of the stereotype.²⁵

It is doubtful that the authors and publishers of books would have served the public any better than newspapers in making sense of the class and sectional conflicts of mid-nineteenth century America. But we will never know. Split between an impersonal, high culture, disengaged from politics, and a passionate, personalized journalism, quick to find villains and heroes, the print media reflected the contradictions of the world it helped to construct. There is no reason to be nostalgic about politics in the great age of print.

These two case studies in politics and print prompt a closing reflection on the history of books. From the tight little world of Jose Glover and Matthew Daye to the more complex, diversified setting of Greeley and Bennett, we have followed a path into the intellectual dilemma we face today. The divorce between culture and power limits our grasp of both. Intellectuals and journalists, publishers and politicians, readers of the *New York Post* and of the *New York Review of Books*: these opposing categories, so familiar in our scholarship, blind us to the ways in which the groups they purport to represent have shaped one another in our past. The

25. Van Dusen, *Greeley*, pp. 51–53; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 181–97; Leonard, *Power of the Press*, pp. 97–131.

terms we impose on book history require their own historical context. Nobody, of course, can entirely transcend his or her own times. Still, we need to overcome the divide between popular and high culture running through our books, our politics, and our lives. That, I submit, is the challenge of this anniversary of the little press that gave us the Freeman's Oath three hundred fifty years ago.²⁶

26. The full-scale crystallization of the rift between the high-minded journals of impartial information and the sensationalistic tabloids came only with the rise of the 'yellow press' in the 1890s. For that story, see Schudson, *Discovering the News*, pp. 88-120.

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