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Americanization of the British Press, 1830s-1914

Speed in the Age of Transatlantic Journalism

Joel H. Wiener



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**Speed in the Age of Transatlantic
Journalism**

Joel H. Wiener

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*For Erika, Andrew, Adam, Lexi, Emma and Rebecca
The next generation of newspaper readers*

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*“NEVER FORGET THAT MEN HAVE TAMED AND CAUGHT
THE LIGHTNING; CLAD IT IN A LIVERY KNOWN AS NEWS”*

(John Davidson, 1903)

Introduction

Imagine a middle-class family sitting down to breakfast in July 1829, in the well-to-do Bayswater section of London. *The Times* is face upwards on the table, its dense, unbroken text conveying dramatic news about political events in Paris. The newspaper recounts a drift towards autocracy in the government of Charles X, as well as the emergence of a popular opposition. None of this news appears on the front page, however, the latter being given over instead to small advertisements (“personals”) that concern mostly house lettings and job opportunities. News reports, from Paris and other European capitals, which are lifted primarily from Continental newspapers, appear on the two inside pages of the four-page paper next to several of the leading articles. The remainder of the inside matter (the fourth page also consists of advertisements) includes summaries of legal cases, accounts of public meetings, letters from correspondents and financial intelligence. Occasionally a prurient bit of news sneaks its way into the *Times*, such as an account of a murder or rape. And during the months when parliament is in session a portion of the paper’s space is given over to lengthy summaries or verbatim texts of important speeches. But there are no pictures, headlines, crossheads or by-lines. At seven pence a copy (about 13 American cents), the *Times* provides a compact and reassuring, if somewhat unimaginative, read for the family seated at the London breakfast table.¹

Four thousand miles away, on Bowling Green in lower Manhattan, a New York City family of comparable means sits down to read a newspaper on the same morning. Most likely, this family will be perusing Colonel James Webb’s *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer*, which sells for six cents and circulates predominantly among the city’s business and professional classes. The family will not learn anything about the dramatic political events in Paris for another five or six weeks,

when the sailing ships that carry London and Continental newspapers reach Sandy Hook, Long Island, where they will be met by schooners hired by Colonel Webb or his formidable competitor, Gerard Hallock, owner of the *New York Journal of Commerce*, for the purpose of bringing the news to American readers.² Until then the New York inhabitants will have to make do with “stale” international news, some of it lifted without attribution from the *Times* and other London newspapers. To be sure, the *Morning Courier’s* Washington news reports are reasonably up to date and, as it happens, presented in a lively style by the paper’s Washington correspondent, James Gordon Bennett, an ambitious young journalist recently arrived from Scotland who also sends reports from Saratoga Springs and Albany, New York.³ If anything, the *Morning Courier* is more businesslike and concise in tone than the *Times*. It provides minimal news coverage (including a section entitled “Miscellanies” in the right hand column of the front page), fewer editorials and a layout that is equally dense. Like the *Times*, it is a compendium of commercial and political news interspersed with advertisements. It has no visual or typographical breaks of any consequence in its text. It contains little in the way of local news and prints most of its news reports on the inside pages. “Staid, prosy, and expensive” is a descriptive phrase used by a contemporary journalist that can apply equally well to the leading London or New York newspaper in 1829.⁴

If we turn the clock forward almost a century to the summer of 1914, the framework will have shifted enormously. During the intervening 85 years millions of new readers have come to the fore in both cities, and they are as likely to be found on public trams and underground trains ferrying people to and from work, as in smart drawing rooms or seated around comfortable breakfast tables. These readers would be able to choose from a more entertaining selection of newspapers. If they live in London there is a reasonable possibility that they will be reading Alfred Harmsworth’s halfpenny *Daily Mail*, founded in 1896; if in New York, perhaps the *New York Evening Journal*, a penny newspaper owned by William Randolph Hearst that boasts the largest circulation in the United States. Consumers of the Hearst paper are likely to be entertained by banner headlines on the front page that summarize in journalistic shorthand the details of the latest gruesome crime to afflict the city. For example, on the first day of July the newspaper directs its attention almost exclusively to the titillating saga of a prominent Long Island woman shot to death in her doctor’s office. Suggestive headlines jump out from the front page: “ASSASSIN SHOTS PATIENT: MEANT TO KILL DOCTOR: SCANDAL IS BEHIND SLAYING OF WOMAN

IN PHYSICIAN'S OFFICE." Photographs of the scene of the crime are prominently displayed, together with detailed accounts of the police investigation.⁵

Most of the remainder of the paper is taken up with bold display advertising and an assortment of news about New York, much of it dealing with crime. International news coverage is minimal, and the *Evening Journal* includes only a few condensed wire service reports from places like Mexico City, where a revolution is under way, and Sarajevo, in distant Bosnia, where the heir to the Austrian throne has just been assassinated. Of greater interest to the paper's readers are its familiar features: Dorothy Dix's renowned "advice to the lovelorn" column; the two popular comic strips, "Krazy Kat" and "Polly and her Pals"; baseball news provided by Sam Crane and a new breed of effervescent sports reporters. Serialized versions of two recently released movies, "The Pearl of the Punjab" and "The Perils of Pauline," are another popular feature of the paper. The *Evening Journal* is easy to read and diverse in its coverage. It reflects, crudely to be sure, the drama of ordinary life in a way that none of the newspapers of 1829 could even remotely aspire to.

The London *Daily Mail* is more restrained than the Hearst paper. For one thing it still prints nearly all of its news on inside pages, a practice it will stubbornly adhere to until the outbreak of war with Germany in 1939. But its single column decked headlines catch the eye, it has photographs, and portions of its eight pages are given over to sports, serialized fiction and subjects like cooking and fashion that are deemed to be of special interest to women readers.⁶ A large amount of space is also devoted to crime and news from the divorce courts. The *Daily Mail* describes itself robustly on one of its ears as "The Busy Man's Daily Journal." While it would not come close to meeting this specification if published in this form either in London or New York 75 or so years later, it is vastly more spirited and energetic than the staid *Times* of 1829.

The transformation of Anglo-American journalism between the 1830s and 1914 was an event of revolutionary importance. It ushered in a great age of print, lasting nearly two centuries and now, perhaps, facing the prospect of extinction. It was an era in which popular newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic came to dominate the reading habits and daily consciousness of ordinary people. This New Journalism (to use the name by which it is best known in Britain), or Yellow Journalism (as it was referred to in the United States), or Tabloid Journalism (a twentieth century generic label on both sides of the Atlantic) emphasized

human-interest, visual matter, typographical boldness and rapid, speedy news coverage.⁷ It replaced a press nurtured in a traditional format, political and pedagogical in orientation and read by relatively small numbers of people, with one catering to every conceivable taste. By responding to, and transforming, the reading habits of millions of people, it made newspapers an integral facet of popular communications.

This revolution in journalism forms the core of this book, which considers the ways in which British and American press experiences in the nineteenth century interacted and exerted influence on each other. While popular journalism in Britain pioneered the retailing of gossip and the use of pictures, most of the key transformations in journalism occurred a little earlier and had a greater impact in America. Beginning in the 1830s, with the rise of a penny press, American newspapers began to exhibit some of the characteristics of modern mass circulation journalism. Newly developed technology was harnessed to the press, while urban reporting, with its use of the personal interview, by-lines and speed in its search after human-interest stories, took hold there first. Best known, in this regard, was the journalism of Joseph Pulitzer and Hearst near the close of the century with its focus on crime and scandal, large headlines and enthusiasm for investigative reporting.

But it is important to emphasize that the press revolution took place on both sides of the Atlantic. By 1914, popular newspapers were being read by millions of people throughout the transatlantic world; published in daily, evening and Sunday editions; and filled with pictorial advertising, gossip, sports, features intended to attract women and children, and fast-breaking news stories transmitted by wire services at unprecedented rates of speed. These papers looked and felt different than their predecessors. They were cheap, visual and (by the standards of the time) sensational in tone. Their staffs were both professionally trained to some extent and unwieldy in size. The technology that produced them was constantly developing new applications. And their goal was to provide entertainment as well as news and, above all, to make a profit for their owners.

These newspapers were the joint products of a common culture and indefinably transatlantic in sensibility. The many parallels to be found in American and British journalism during the nineteenth century are not fortuitous. Both nations were steadily reconfigured by comparable economic and political developments, including the evolution of representative forms of government and the restructuring of traditional social and ethical relationships. By their ephemeral nature newspapers are best able to depict and embody such transformative events. They

are a token of the speed of modern life, which enables human activity to be expressed in all of its variety. When newspapers are crabbed and restrictive, as they were for much of the century, political and social patterns can legitimately be interpreted as resistant to change. When popular elements of journalism come steadily to the fore, as they did in both the United States and Britain, a movement towards cultural democracy, with its attendant stresses and tensions, is clearly under way. Unfortunately, even some of the very best work on the British and American press in recent years has failed to recognize that these changes in journalism were a product of a common framework of democratization and of joint cultural formation.

Much work on the popular press has tended to view it from the perspective of its commercial imperative, and in some instances to emphasize the neutering of political consciousness that this has brought about. It has frequently been maintained that the ordinary reader is a victim of the forces of advertising, or of social control, and that the replacement of the values of liberal journalism and of the public sphere by a passive "mass culture" reflects a wrong turning in press history. There is much to savor in such analyses, portions of which have been influenced by the writings of Jurgen Habermas, Theodor Adorno and others. But to focus on the production of newspapers at the expense of their consumption, especially when dealing with the rise of the modern press, is, I believe, to oversimplify a crucial strain in the history of journalism.⁸ It is essential that historians take into account the ways in which the dissemination of cheap print enormously enlarged opportunities for personal choice. To whatever degree commercial factors distorted the popularization of journalism, and however much one approves or disapproves of the end product, the creation of a mass circulation press fulfilled the expectations (and more) of a new readership. That, it seems to me, is the key explanation for its enormous success throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a success that is now being challenged by an extraordinary technological revolution that is proffering its own claims to cultural democracy.⁹

It is not my intention to set forth a theoretical model of press development in this book, though, admittedly, some of the best work in media history on both sides of the Atlantic is currently being done in the area of theory. Mark Hampton, Laurel Brake, Martin Conboy, James Curran and Andrew King are names that come immediately to mind, and I am grateful to them and others for providing insights into the structure of press dynamics.¹⁰ My purpose, however, is somewhat different. It is to demonstrate in concrete ways that changes in journalism are

long-range, and do not rest exclusively on the innovations of a few key individuals, or (in the context of transatlantic history) the contributions of a single nation.¹¹ Journalism is richly layered and, in the best sense of the word, a collaborative activity. During the nineteenth century, sub-editors and engravers were as critical to its success as overseas reporters and compositors. So, too, though many of the details remain elusive, were rewrite men, “penny-a-liners” and beat reporters. The great household names of the century – James Gordon Bennett, Hearst, Stead, Pulitzer, Alfred Harmsworth – were of central importance to the transformation of journalism (their influence is more than reflected in the pages of this volume), but numerous “lesser breeds” also participated in the maturation of Anglo-American journalism. As a way of emphasizing the evolutionary nature of changes in the press I have focused on themes like the collection and distribution of news; the reconfiguration of newspaper content; developing relationships among proprietors, editors, and reporters; and the impact of an innovative technology that came increasingly to be defined by speed. It is hoped that such a perspective on the changes that transformed transatlantic journalism, and on the process of “Americanization” that accompanied it, will facilitate discussions of how ideas and cultural standards are communicated, about the nature of professionalism, and about whether or not traditional literary quality can (or even should) be maintained during periods of great change.

Several caveats are in order. First, there are gaps and distortions in this book, a few by intent, others because of inadequate sources of information. Published writings about the press in America and Britain are, in a curious way, both voluminous and relatively scarce. In recent years there has been an explosion of interest in the history of journalism among scholars on both sides of the Atlantic. Organizations such as the Research Society for Victorian Periodicals (RSVP) and the American Journalism Historians Association (AJHA) sponsor annual conferences and have stimulated much new work in the field. Journals like *American Journalism*, the *Victorian Periodicals Review* and *Media History* reflect the intensity of interest in the subject. The ongoing digitization of newspapers and magazines has also generated a host of profitable studies in a multiplicity of areas. Nonetheless, important spaces remain unfilled. Relatively little work has been done, for example, on the daily content of the nineteenth-century popular press, including crime, sports, and sex, the trinity of themes that define modern tabloid journalism. Nor has pictorial journalism received its full due, or gossip journalism, or to select another example at random, sub-editing, the

relatively mundane task that provided much of the cement of print journalism. And while numerous biographies of journalists are available, a number of them very good, gaps remain to be filled: to name a few, Stead, Archibald Forbes, Melville Stone, Winifred Black.

By choice I have given a disproportionate emphasis to the journalism of London and New York. The breakfast tables, railway and tram stations, and reading rooms of these two great metropolises loom large in this book, at the expense of cities that also produced an impressive array of daily and weekly newspapers, including Manchester, San Francisco, Birmingham, Chicago, Leeds, St. Louis, Glasgow and Boston. I believe there is a justification for this emphasis. In the case of Britain it is based upon the fact that despite the increasing importance of the provincial press, a London-centered "national press" existed from the outset of the nineteenth century and has continued to dominate much of the journalism of that country. Furthermore, key elements of mass circulation journalism derived from the experience of the London press. Between 1830 and 1914 an overwhelming number of aspiring journalists regarded work in London as the pinnacle of their ambition. They migrated to "Fleet Street" when and if they were able to do so, and sought to write for newspapers located there. London, dominant in so many ways, was, clearly, a forcing ground for journalistic creativity.

The United States presents a trickier situation. Metropolitan journalism was less concentrated there, and a regional press prevailed in many aspects of the nation's life.¹² The enormous size of the country had a great deal to do with this, as did the segmented pace of economic change, which I have tried to take into account. Still, the bulk of the analysis in this book focuses on the newspapers of New York because, like London, this hugely significant urban center was the epicenter of change throughout much of the nineteenth century. It attracted ambitious, talented journalists from every walk of life, provided a burgeoning market for the sale and distribution of news, and by its symbolic commitment to speed and size appeared to invite the process of journalistic change to germinate within its boundaries.

There is a final general point to be made. I believe that scholarly insight is enriched by comparative analysis, and that when applied to journalism such an approach deepens contextual understanding, for example, making it easier to measure the accuracy of words like "sensationalism" or "speed." It is, of course, possible to focus on countries other than Britain and the United States, as Simon Potter, Chandrika Kaul and others have demonstrated so effectively. But the two countries I have selected exerted measurable influences on each other and

have the added advantage of being inextricably linked by language and culture.¹³ I also have a confession to make: similarities and differences between British and American newspapers are, at bottom, personally fascinating to me. I have been an unabashed (and unapologetic) consumer of the quality and tabloid press of both countries for many years (including the recently departed *News of the World*) and am lured by the seductiveness of Anglo-American interactions. Many questions arise, some of which I have tried to answer in this book. Why do lead stories appear on different sides of the front pages of broadsheets in each country: Britain's to the left, America's to the right? To what degree are the reporting styles of the two countries different? Why has "tit and bum" journalism become a defining feature of British tabloid newspapers like the *Sun*, while less able to take root in America other than in the so-called supermarket tabloids?¹⁴ Why did newspaper technology in Britain lag behind for several decades? Why were and are American journalists more likely to undertake serious investigative reporting than their British counterparts? As with journalism itself, such questions (and the answers they provoke) have the potential to be endlessly fascinating, especially at a time when print journalism seems to be confronting a grave challenge from Internet technology, one that may presage its ultimate destruction.

Notes

- 1 For example, see the *Times*, 15 September 1829. Late-breaking news, highlighted by words such as "Express from Paris," was placed just before the leading articles, which were on the second page.
- 2 See James L. Crouthamel, *James Watson Webb: A Biography* (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 1969).
- 3 By modern standards even news from the nation's capital was stale. An elaborate "pony express" system installed by Webb in 1830 took about 30 hours to bring news from Washington to New York. In 1831 Webb introduced a steamboat from Baltimore and cut the time to 15 hours. Crouthamel, *Webb*, 29–30.
- 4 See especially *Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer*, 1 August 1829 and 1 October 1829. The phrase is taken from Frank O'Brien, *The Story of "The Sun": New York: 1833–1928* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1928), 82.
- 5 See especially *New York Evening Journal*, 1 July 1914 and 6 July 1914. Harmsworth was ennobled as Viscount Northcliffe in 1905, though I use his family name throughout this text for purposes of clarity.
- 6 Page seven of the *Daily Mail* featured "Women's Realm," edited by a succession of female journalists.
- 7 The phrase New Journalism, first used in Britain in the 1880s, has not frequently been employed in American press history. But in the 1960s a group

of American writer-journalists, including Norman Mailer, George Plimpton and Tom Wolfe, developed a distinctive “non-fictional” style and came to be referred to as New Journalists. See Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism: With an Anthology Edited by Tom Wolfe and E. W. Johnson* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) and Robert S. Boynton, *The New New Journalism: Conversations with America’s Best Nonfiction Writers on Their Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

- 8 Commercial influence on the press features prominently in Alan J. Lee, *The Origins of the Popular Press, 1855–1914* (London: Croom Helm, 1976); Gerald J. Baldasty, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); Jean K. Chalaby, *The Invention of Journalism* (Macmillan, 1998). For social control, see the relevant essays in George Boyce, James Curran and Pauline Wingate (eds), *Newspaper History: From the 17th Century to the Present Day* (London: Constable, 1978), and in James Curran, Anthony Smith and Pauline Wingate (eds), *Impacts and Influences: Essays on Media Power in the Twentieth Century* (London: Methuen, 1987). An exceptionally fine study that focuses on readers rather than economic supply is Thomas C. Leonard, *News for All: America’s Coming-Of-Age With the Press* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- 9 Two impressive studies dealing with cultural democratization are Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978) and John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1930* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).
- 10 Samples of recent theoretical work are Mark Hampton, *Visions of the Press in Britain, 1850–1950* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Laurel Brake, *Print in Transition, 1850–1910: Studies in Media and Book History* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001); Martin Conboy, *Journalism, a Critical History* (London: Sage, 2004); Andrew King, *The London Journal, 1845–83: Production and Gender* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).
- 11 Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961) continues to be an immensely influential study. It has given a stimulus to a “democratic” perspective on literacy and journalism and strengthened theoretical work in more general cultural areas. See Stuart Hall and others (eds), *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies, 1972–1979* (London: Hutchinson, 1980).
- 12 A brilliant study of regionalism in British journalism is Aled Gruffydd Jones, *Press, Politics and Society: A History of Journalism in Wales* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993).
- 13 See Simon J. Potter, *News and the British World: The Emergence of an Imperial Press System* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003); Chandrika Kaul, *Reporting the Raj: The British Press and India, c. 1880–1922* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). For Britain and the United States, see the collection of essays in Joel H. Wiener and Mark Hampton (eds), *Anglo-American Media Interactions, 1850–2000* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- 14 Even the supermarket tabloids are different. Papers like the *Star* and the *National Enquirer*, published in the United States, feature preposterous stories of gossip and scandal but rarely anything sexually explicit.