

Writers must recognize that the life of intellect is going to be carried more and more in the weekly and daily papers. They hold the promise of great excellence, particularly for the condensed essay, narrative, criticism.

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Papers on Literature and Art



The Penny Press: Anecdotes of New York

Newspaper Culture The discourse of New York City during the period 1833–57 is based on a narrative of an urban encounter between a representative middle-class person and the “new” New York. In this first part of my book I examine texts that enact encounters with the extraordinary city as a *whole*: they present verbal equivalents of the New York panoramic illustrations very popular in the same antebellum period. In this first chapter my texts are those created by the brash editors of the new “penny” newspapers in New York. These men announced in editorials and in what their papers covered that the city itself was the news. They asserted as well that they themselves were the new and necessary men, the heroic interpreters of the new urban culture.

The culture created by the emergent bourgeois class was foremost

a "newspaper culture." Like European cities earlier in the century, antebellum New York defined itself to itself and the world largely by newspaper. The advent of the cheap newspaper in the nineteenth century in Paris and then in other cities and New York is the exact moment of the invention of *le quotidien* as an object of cultural attention. From that point on, the ordinary and daily is what we *assume*, and the newspaper is its medium. Walter Benjamin quotes Jean Villemessant, founder of *Le Figaro*: "'To my readers,' he used to say, 'an attic fire in the Latin Quarter is more important than a revolution in Madrid.'"¹

The newspaper is a metonym for modern life itself.

In its routinized, quotidian recurrence, in its quintessential prosaicism, in its unrepentant commercialism, the newspaper almost seems to have been devised to represent the pattern of variation without change, the repetitiveness, autonomization, and commodification which . . . have marked fundamental patterns of our social existence.²

The invention of the cheap newspaper was the beginning of a disposable culture. The newspaper does not give us memorable story but information, and information does not long survive the moment in which it was new. It "lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time."³

In the first third of the nineteenth century, New York was the newspaper capital of the United States, publishing about six dailies and six more weeklies and semiweeklies. Most successful of these papers were the *Commercial Advertiser*, the *Mercantile Advertiser*, the *Daily Advertiser*, the *Journal of Commerce*, and the *Courier and Enquirer*. As their names show these papers gave large amounts of space to commercial announcements and business news. James Watson Webb's *Courier and Enquirer* had a livelier tone than its ponderous competition, particularly after 1827 when Webb bought up the *Enquirer* and acquired thereby the clever journalists Mordecai M. Noah and James Gordon Bennett. Other papers, like the *Evening Post* edited by William Cullen Bryant, were primarily political papers. None of these papers gave the "news" as we now understand the term.⁴

In 1833 Benjamin H. Day's *New York Sun* changed the idea of the

newspaper in New York. Day's innovation was to make his paper small in format, cheap, independent of party or mercantile patronage, and filled with what readers wanted, not what they needed. The paper was sold on the "London plan" to newspaper boys for sixty-seven cents for a hundred copies, and the boys aggressively resold their copies on the streets for a penny. The advertisement for boys in the first issue was headlined "To the Unemployed," and Bernard Flaherty, all of ten years old, was the first of the "unemployed" to sell the *Sun*. Day's idea was to forgo the stability of subscription lists and reach for the market just outside his office, the potential readers walking in the streets. Within four months the *Sun's* circulation was four thousand, almost equaling the largest mercantile paper. In 1835 a new steam press increased the *Sun's* printing capacity to twenty-two thousand copies, far larger than any daily paper in the United States and almost as large as the largest circulations in London.⁵

The *Sun's* most important innovation was its coverage of everyday New York. Its news was the news of New York, with comparatively few commercial or political items. Like the newspaper sketch or "leaf" called a *feuilleton* in Paris, George Wisner's narratives and the *Sun's* other anecdotes were rudimentary literary forms struggling toward a descriptive realism that could present the city's new effects in an entertaining way to the paper's readers. Each sketch is a narrated encounter with the city; collectively the sketches are the daily newspaper, an ever-reiterated panoramic description of New York.

Day's best-known early features were the humorous police-court anecdotes written by George W. Wisner. Wisner, imitating the *London Morning Herald's* reporting on Bow Street court, was willing to get up early (court was at 4 A.M.) to cover the court and then write the brief narratives. His "funny" stories about the Irish lower class were an immediate hit.

Margaret Thomas was drunk in the street—said she never would get drunk again "upon her honor." Committed, "upon honor."

William Luvoy got drunk because yesterday was so devilish warm. Drank 9 glasses of brandy and water and said he would be cursed if he wouldn't drink 9 more as quick as he could raise the money to buy it with. He would like to know what right the magis-

trate had to interfere with his private affairs. Fined \$1—forgot his pocketbook, and was sent over to Bridewell.

Bridget McMunn got drunk and threw a pitcher at Mr. Ellis, of 53 Ludlow st. Bridget said she was the mother of 3 little orphans—God bless their dear souls—and if she went to prison they would choke to death for the want of something to eat. Committed.⁶

Wisner's report does not seem so funny to us, nor would it seem so funny just a decade or two later in New York, when the seriousness of urban problems was even more in the public's view, but in 1834 the style was an immediate hit and the beginning of the *news*.⁷ The news tells us about the immediate and the everyday, and at the same time it tells us it disposes of it. The narrative persona is the satiric urban "expert" who is, despite his class, streetwise enough to know where the police courts are and irreverent enough to crack jokes about drunks. This police court reporter takes it upon himself to see what is going on among the immigrant classes and presents the results of his encounter with the (initially) inexplicable and unrecognizable "other." Implicitly well educated and experienced, Wisner is alone among the savages and places them within easily understandable, funny categories. He does not linger to struggle with social analysis: it is as if the problem is not serious enough to need explaining.

Another *Sun* innovation was to make up items that Day thought would create a continuing desire for more papers in the public. The most notorious faked story was Richard Adams Locke's "Moon Hoax" in 1835. The paper printed a small article asserting that Sir John Herschel had invented a telescope that had discovered creatures living on the moon and on subsequent days printed longer pieces, as if following up on the original story. The interest was enormous. All the other newspapers were taken in and became themselves eager for the latest from the moon. Yale sent a delegation down to study the "documents" from which the first article claimed authority. There was great fun and great sales until Locke had a drink too many and slipped the truth to a *Journal of Commerce* reporter. Even the revelations of the trick boosted *Sun* sales, of course, and the condescending outrage of the educated elites at the misuse of the media delighted the readership and helped define the cheap newspaper as the irreverent opposition to cultural dominance by the wealthy and established.⁸

The *Sun* was rapidly followed into the market. In the six years between 1834 and 1840, thirty-five penny dailies were issued in New York. Most lived only briefly, but others, particularly James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald*, survived to outdo Day with his own idea. Michael Schudson contends that from the *Sun* on American newspapers started to "reflect, not the affairs of an elite in a small trading society, but the activities of an increasingly varied, urban, and middle-class society of trade, transportation and manufacturing." He thinks penny papers began in urban commercial centers and, more than anywhere else, in New York because they were needed to express and build the culture of a democratic market society. The papers articulated a radically new culture "which had no place for social or intellectual deference" and in which it became possible to think of "'self-interest' as the mainspring of human behavior and . . . a motive to be admired."⁹

The Devil on Two Sticks: James Gordon Bennett James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald* was the most untamed of the new papers. Bennett understood the principle of disposable news, had as much fun as Richard Adams Locke at being outrageous, and made clear in everything he wrote that the hero of the news narrative was the bold editor himself. All parts of the city were Bennett's beat: anything could be revealed in a flash by the revolving beacon of his panoramic attention; any urban mystery could be found out. The *Herald* reported on the city's variety and complexity, and its new sights—from the destitution of the Five Points slum neighborhood to the extravagance of the Astor House hotel—were sensations that the *Herald* worked and reworked for its public.

The *Herald* did become known and respected for the quality and seriousness of its news gathering, but violent death was often the heart of its New York news. In its first two weeks of publication the *Herald* carried accounts of three suicides, three murders, a fire that killed five persons, an accident in which a man blew off his head, descriptions of a guillotine execution in France, a riot in Philadelphia, and the execution of Major John André half a century before. To the lurid accounts of accident and crime the *Herald* soon attached investigative (and imaginative) narratives that reported the intimate details of the lives of the New York rich, exposing with undisguised delight the pretensions and

excesses of heretofore inviolate elites. The *Herald* perfected the keyhole reporting that turned what had formerly been private event into public narrative.

Charles Dickens tells us what he thinks of the New York penny press of this early period when he has the eponymous hero of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844) arrive in New York harbor just as Dickens had two years before at the beginning of his United States tour. Martin experiences the United States first *as* New York newspaper. His ship is boarded and overrun by newsboys, and their shrill cries are the first voices he hears in the democratic country. Dickens re-creates New York newsboy speech and reorients it into an attack on the New York press as well as on the United States' brand of unprincipled democracy.

"Here's the New York Sewer! Here's some of the twelfth thousand of to-day's Sewer, with the best accounts of the markets, and all the shipping news, and four whole columns of country correspondence, and a full account of the Ball at Mrs. White's last night, where all the beauty and fashion of New York was assembled; with the Sewer's own particulars of the private lives of all the ladies that was there! . . . Here's the Sewer, here's the Sewer! Here's the wide-awake Sewer; always on the lookout."¹⁰

The *Sewer*—remarkably like the *Herald*—is first of all proud of itself—its circulation figures, its fearlessness in exposure, its enterprise in getting "exclusives." Its primary story is the story of its own success. Most of all, the *Sewer* is "wide-awake." "Wide awake," an Americanism originating in the 1830s, is the most admired characteristic of the market-society American.

Bennett's writing in the *Herald* is so outrageous that Dickens's version hardly seems a parody. Bennett is always self-consciously creating a new "wide-awake" institution. The *Herald* is not merely a new newspaper, it is a new social organization, a new site where discourse occurs.

What is to prevent a daily newspaper from being made the greatest organ of social life? Books have had their day—the theaters have had their day—the temple of religion has had its day. A newspaper can be made to take the lead of all these in the great movements of human thought, and of human civilization. A newspaper can send more souls to Heaven, and save more from Hell, than all the churches or chapels