

# The Rise of the Penny Newspaper

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## WHAT

**Newspaper:** a paper that is printed and distributed usually daily or weekly and that contains news, articles of opinion, features, and advertising (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2013).

## Defining Society

The climate in America during the 19th century was a culturally diverse one, a melting pot. As the middle and working classes grew, with varying views both cultural and political, this diverse population was hungry for new knowledge.

Literate Americans wanted information daily, quickly and for it to be readily available to the public.

## The Penny Press

The Penny Press could not have come at a better time.

It was a daily newspaper that originated in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, on the American East Coast. Mass and inexpensive production made this newspaper popular with the reading public. It also extended its influence to the poorer classes (as most newspapers at the time sold for 6-cents). The Penny Press was delivered for just 1-cent, a penny.

## Benjamin H. Day

Although not the first to experiment with “sports, gossip and cheap press,” as other papers and magazines in circulation were doing at the time, Benjamin H. Day led the transformation of the daily newspaper (“Penny Press,” 2013). An American journalist and publisher, he created the New York Sun during the depression.

Benjamin H. Day believed in the popularity of his newspaper in hard times, as many could not afford other more expensive press. He also wanted to appeal to the large immigrant population that existed, which he believed at the time had not been included in the audience of other newspapers. He was the founding father of the first Penny Newspaper, the New York Sun. He articulated his purpose in printing the paper proclaiming that: “The object of this paper is to lay before the public at a price within the means of everyone all the news of the day and at the same time offer an advantageous medium for advertisements” (Payne, 1926, p. 244). This motto was printed at the top of every page of the newspaper. The first Penny Paper was published in 1833 and within just a few months, it had the largest circulation of any newspaper in New York City (ProfessorFas, 2009).

## Readership

With the advent of the Penny Press, newspaper publishers began to take a closer look at their reading audiences. They quickly realized that what interested the 6-cent subscription reader, did not interest the Penny Press audience.

Penny Press publishers began to draw “news stories” from criminal courts and police stations to fill their newspapers, emphasizing the common person, as this was what their readership enjoyed. This created more appeal to the audience of the Penny Press (ProfessorFas, 2009). With the working class reader in mind, Penny Press newspapers were written in sensationalistic ways, depicting a picture of ordinary social life. For the first time, the American newspaper printed reports from police, courts, the streets, and from private households (Nerone, 1987). With the inclusion of human-interest stories, Penny Newspapers became a medium of everyday life.

## HOW

## Redefining Society

The rise of the Penny Press helped reshape society in many fundamental ways. It made news accessible to all

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of society's classes, developed and nurtured objectivity in the latest news, and solidified the strong relationship between advertisers and publishers.

The rise of the Penny Press in America, significantly impacted culture and society as it fulfilled a thirst for knowledge and increased engagement in the working class, with stories that interested them and that they could easily relate to. Before the development of Day's Penny Press newspaper, the average American citizen may not have been able to purchase a daily newspaper, or even been aware that such a thing exists. In *A History of Mass Communication: Six Information Revolutions*, Fang (1997) notes that the average citizen may not have known about newspapers prior to the Penny Press because popular 6-cent newspapers were only circulated by costly subscription services that were out of their reach. The Penny Press brought daily news to the masses, making it possible for every aspiring literate individual to access it. As a result, the "news reading public" was born. By making papers cheaply available to the public, Penny newspapers revolutionized circulation (Nerone, 1987). The penny papers introduced the cash system of circulation, where

distributors or newsboys relied on street sales instead of the previous method of subscription sales.

## Political Implications

Before the existence of the Penny Press, most print press circulations had direct and motivated agendas.

Political parties and various groups, to sell or sway a particular reading public, would often produce circulations. The Penny Press however, wanted to appeal to a larger reading public; it was not concerned with a political agenda. Fang (1997) states that in order to please as many readers as possible, the Penny Press insisted that facts were coloured as little as humanely possible and as a result, objectivity took precedent over opinion. This significant shift, in reporting style, ensured that the mass news reading public was always able to develop opinions as they devoured new stories each and every day. This shift moved daily debates and discussions, from the upper class wealthy man parlour, to the working class coffeehouse and city streets.

## Advertising Industry

Penny Press newspapers were unique in many ways, but perhaps the most innovative and impactful approach they took was to solidify a relationship with advertisers that is still strong and relevant in today's society. Penny Press newspapers were able to stay in print due largely in part to the companies who paid for advertisement space.

The low cost of the Penny Press could not have lasted without the support from its advertisers. As soon as advertisers saw the potential and overwhelming interest in these daily news stories, companies and organizations started eating up advertisement space.

Benjamin H. Day and the other Penny Press publishers developed a sure-fire formula to entice advertisers.

In *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins in Modern Communications*, Starr (2004) confirms that the mission of the Penny Press was to obtain a high circulation of what they considered a livelier product to broaden their viewer readership. This pairing of exciting content with high circulation was a golden nugget for advertisers, as their product information would be sure to reach the widest audience possible. The

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marriage of advertising and the Penny Press had implications that were astounding and are still very relevant today. Starr (2004) confirms:

Penny papers were an editorial and entrepreneurial innovation of singular importance. In their quest for circulation, they became the first papers in the United States to publish extensive coverage of local news and to turn news itself into entertainment. In their orientation to increase and build circulation and advertising, (they sold their readers to advertisers as much as they sold copies to readers) penny papers anticipated the modern structure of the media enterprise (p. 134-35).

This is a tradition that is still in practice today by the tabloid newspapers. The sensationalism created by the Penny Press still drives advertisers and funds many of the papers we see on newsstands today.

## WHY

### The Power of Print

Penny Press newspapers played a major role in defining American society in early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Knowledge and the power of information, was transferred from the upper class aristocrats to the working class Americans. As a result,

society gained access to non-biased daily news at an affordable rate, broadening local and global perspectives.

The power of print had fundamental effects on society. As early as in the Renaissance, Elizabeth Eisenstein, declared that print and text significantly impact the development of capitalism, culture, and politics, as referenced in Ong (2002).

Through Bolter's (2001) Theory of Remediation, with the advent of the printing press, Benjamin H. Day and his Penny Press newspaper, significantly revolutionized print in America in the early 1800's. Penny Press newspapers had a substantial impact with the ways in which society absorbed information and became educated. Prior to the mass circulation of daily print, information was delivered orally to the public.

### Changing Technology

The changing shape of print and technology allowed for the advancement of the Penny Press Newspaper.

Starr (2004) states that the basic formula was created to increase circulation. With higher circulation, and therefore more advertisements, there was an increase in affordability, coupled with a more appealing product that reached newer and larger

audiences. The early 1800's saw several innovations in technology that affected print. Starr (2004) declares the advances in technology allowed reductions in the cost of print and paper, which contributed to the wide influence over public opinion. Due to its accessibility, the information of the Penny Press was easily digested and consumed. If it were not for the advancements in technology, society would not have had the opportunity to gain knowledge at such a mass level.

### Educational Implications

The Penny Press not only played a key role in the development of the modern newspaper, but also significantly impacted the accessibility and affordability of education. Although not entirely responsible for the rise in literacy, the increase in readers the Penny Press brought, is significant in its role in education. The newspaper industry provided literate persons the ability to absorb printed text at their own pace and to develop their own points of views. This could be done in the privacy of one's own home and/or in other comfortable settings. Starr (2004), remarks the penny newspaper could be read on



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the go, whereas the former large-scale newspaper was read spread out. People were able to personalize their own learning and develop thoughts and opinions based on personal interpretations of the text. Ong (2002) confirms that print influenced the development of personal privacy; it was a pillar of modern society, shifting it from large manuscript to smaller, more portable text that nurtured independent viewing. He also talks about "context-free language." Within print, for example in the Penny Press, text cannot be questioned as oral language can be. Because the authors of newspaper articles are unreachable, readers are unable to directly question or challenge the information. This creates an opportunity for the reader to use metacognition and/or discussion strategies to collaborate and form new knowledge. These reflections and conversations enhance education by allowing people to create new meaning and expand their learning.

The Penny Press was a remediation of previous newspapers. Education, like print, is in a constant state of remediation (Bolter, 2001). Through the evolution of print and technology, education borrows from Bolter's theory of remediation to strengthen pedagogy by using existing practicing and improving them.

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