Do you recognize this man? Well, neither did I before I started my research on the penny press. His name is Benjamin Day and many claim that he revolutionized the content and style of American journalism through the creation of *The Sun*, a daily newspaper published in New York in 1833.

However, before we're able to focus on the penny press and its significant impact – and to fully comprehend how the penny press was so innovative – we first need to gain an understanding of what newspapers were like before 1833.

History of Newspapers

Newspapers originated in Europe. The oldest newspapers were handwritten on sheets of paper, and the first known instances of these being circulated widely were in Venice as early as 1566. The information in these initial newspapers mostly pertained to the wars and politics of 16th century Europe. 1609 saw the advent of the printed weekly newspapers in Germany, and from this point onwards, hand-written newspapers were gradually replaced with the widespread proliferation of the printed press (Strasberg, 2006).

Yet, these early printed newspapers were still not actually defined by the term "newspaper". The first time the term newspaper was used was thought to be in the early 17th century (Stephens, 1988). The term came to be defined by meaning that they were printed, dated and were published at regular intervals. Meeting these qualifications undoubtedly became easier with the invention and wider accessibility of the printing press.

Moving across the Atlantic, the first American newspaper was established in Boston in 1690. It closely followed the British format of four columns per page and contained mostly news from Britain. However, this trend continued to grow and by the early 1800s, New York City had 11 weekly subscription newspapers that cost approximately 6 cents each per issue. The total circulation of these 11 newspapers was less than 30,000 and boasted a mainly elite readership. In addition, the newspapers from 1783 – 1832 have been given the title of the 'Political Party Press" as they focused mostly on timeless political commentary; news that did not require immediacy (Stephens, 1988).

The Sun
So what changed in 1833? A young 23-year-old printer named Benjamin Day created the New York *Sun.* Initially wanting to promote his own printing business and seek financial gains, Day decided to create a newspaper for the masses that would be printed daily and cost only 1 penny – thus the *Penny Press* was born (Brazeal, 2005). Day published his first paper on September 3, 1833. Originally, Day waited for other papers to go out and copied their news stories, meaning that news in the *Sun* was two-to-three days old when it was published. However, Day recognized that this was ultimately not sustainable and, within his first week, hired writer George Wisner to write the Sun's own news (Brazeal, 2005).

The *Sun* made buying and reading a newspaper more accessible to a wider range of people. However, the consumers were not used to buying a newspaper on a daily basis and it was therefore Day's job to convince the general public that they needed the news. Day accomplished this by putting fake, unpaid, advertisements in the paper to look like he had

people buying advertising space. Through this, Day created a dialogue with his customers and "News became both a commodity and a service" (Castagnaro, 2012, p. 256). Day revolutionized newspapers from being a medium with a long shelf life – because it didn't matter if you read the news late – to being a perishable product that needed replacing daily. This was all made easier by the high-speed press, which by December 1833 could print 1000 sheets per hour (Nerone, 1987).

Day was a savvy businessman who thought carefully about his brand. Brand awareness might seem like common sense to us today, but it hasn't always been the norm – for example, he changed his logo several times and after 15 months added the motto '*it shines for all*'. His business tactics saw almost immediate success. Within first few months, daily circulation had grown to a record-breaking 5000 copies: the previous record was 4500 copies. By 1834, the Sun was circulating 10000 copies daily (Castagnaro, 2012).

How was the Sun different to previous papers? Despite the obvious factors of it being much less expensive and printed daily, there are several other considerations. The Sun was the first popular papers that was politically neutral. Day's venture changed newspapers from being a tool of political privilege to being a social instrument of popular democracy. It served the readers, not the politicians. In addition, the *Sun* had a simplified reading style that appealed to everyone. The way it was sold was also contrasting to the subscription papers of pre-1833: newsboys were used to hawk sensational stories on street corners. Further, the invention of the penny press meant that news over opinion was emphasized. There was an increased focus on human interest stories, which in turn lead to sensationalism. I am going to provide two examples of sensationalism journalism from the 1830s.

The Moon Hoax
For several days in August 1835 many New Yorkers believed that there was fantastical life on the moon. This is due to the 6 articles written by Richard Adams Locke, a reporter for the *Sun*. This fake news story described the scientific discoveries that Sir John Herschel made while using his telescope in South Africa. Small to start, the final report claimed that there was a civilization of temple-building man bats on the moon (Castagnaro, 2012)! Using advanced marketing tactics, each article left the readers wanting more, ensuring that they would buy the paper then next day.

"The Moon Hoax of 1835 represented one of the first hoaxes to successfully use news media to disseminate a completely fabricated scientific discovery to increase a newpaper's sales" (Castagnaro, 2012, p. 254).

Many scholars believe this hoax – perhaps the most successful and longest lasting in American history – to represent an important time in history of the nation: however, the reasons why vary. The moon hoax reinforced the idea of sensationalism, greatly and instantly expanded the Sun's readership: that these were advanced marketing techniques that we not used at the time. At a time when journalism was an occupation rather than a profession, the hoax demonstrated a more modern approach to journalism. By August 21, 1835, the *Sun* boasted a circulation of 19,360, becoming the most read paper in the world at this time.

In the first instance, many people believed the newspaper. Locke included quotes and scientific facts in his writing and the consumer didn't have a reason to believe that the newspapers would deliberately mislead them. Further, the desire of humans to know the characteristics of God's creatures in the heavens made the moon hoax a welcome revelation (Copeland, 2007). There was a couple of months of back and forth between various other papers: was this a hoax or wasn't it? Day and the *Sun* played to the fact that, historically, scientific discoveries have had difficulty being accepted. James Gorden Bennett, the founder of the competing penny press the New York *Herald,* was particularly adamant that what the *Sun* had done was morally wrong.

When the hoax was uncovered, there was a distinct lack of public outrage, which is a sign of journalism at the time. In fact, many people called it ingenious. Readers at the time of the penny press wanted entertainment as much as information, and with the Great Moon Hoax, this is what they received. However, this work of fiction did bring into question the need for objective factual reporting (Black, 2017) .

The Murder of Helen Jewett
Helen Jewett was found dead in her bed in an upscale New York brothel early in the morning of April 10th, 1836. Despite being a gruesome murder, the *Herald* editor James Gordon Bennett was one of the first journalists to visit the scene of such a major crime. He described the bloody corpse as beautiful, as this was part of his overall journalistic strategy (Huntzicker, 2017). This changed the way in which journalism reported on news of this nature; ultimately sensationalizing and glorifying it, as well as adding an air of romanticism, ultimately making it a commodity. Bennett and the *Herald* changed a homicide into a "fantastic amusement" (Huntzicker, 2017). Although many historians (Nerone, 1987) argue that horrible crime stories have always been popular, the penny press turned the news around so quickly and accessibly that their popularity soared to new levels.

Bennett's reporting of Helen Jewett's murder relied on superlatives and he wrote in the first person: this approach was to define crime reporting for many years to come. When he first reported on the murder, he described Helen Jewett's body as an "elegant statue" and cherry-picked the facts so that the tale became one of morality. Even when the police trail dried eventually dried up, Bennett knew that he needed to keep the reader interested and, without new evidence, continued to revisit and cast doubt on evidence they did have. Bennett and the *Herald* gained financial success from the coverage of this murder, which would not have been possible without the dawn of the penny press (Huntzicker, 2017).

Conclusion

The invention and flourishing of the penny press by figures like Benjamin Day and James Bennett was without doubt resourceful. At best, their sensationalism and superlatives could be thought of as ingenious content creation and innovative marketing techniques. At the same time, the same tactics were purposefully exploitive of an unknowing audience.

What is particularly noteworthy for us today is the continued relevance of many of these themes to the ongoing development of the digital media in the 21st century. For example, the proliferation of 'bite-size' news via new media including Twitter has led to a further intensification of the phenomenon initiated by the Sun in the 1830s; the spread of more up-to-date news via an accessible medium to a broader audience. Another example is that of the continued prevalence of "fake news" as a both a media technique and a political tool. These modern-day examples only serve to further strengthen the argument that both Day and Bennett were true pioneers; their approaches were undoubtedly both ingenious and flawed, and their influences – positive and negative – last to this day.

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