

Section 1: Introduction:

Since its advent in the 1830s the penny press has revolutionized the look and feel of newspapers. It is credited with creating a new form of objective writing we now know as journalism

The penny press has defined what people consider to be news and gave lower class access to affordable print. It also gave the urban working class something to read that they could identify with and at times, take their mind off their current hardships.

Not only did the penny press reach tens of thousands of urban citizens on a daily basis, it has also had a lasting impact on the structure and content of newspapers today.

Section 2:

The penny press may have revolutionized journalism into its present recognizable form, but newspapers and journalists of sorts had been around for quite some time before the penny press came onto the scene in the 1830s

Many newspapers were distributed on a weekly or even daily basis to a narrowly targeted audience. Topics discussed in these newspapers were generally geared towards the upper classes and revolved around politics.

These newspapers required an subscription and generally cost 6 cents per issue. Since the state of politics and the views of political parties do not change drastically, the stories in such papers were hardly considered breaking news

Likewise there were the daily commercial and mercantile sheets geared towards trade and goods that would be of interested to prominent citizens and business owners. These dailies also carried a price tag of 6 cents an issue. These topics had very little relevance to the lives of the average urban citizen who was most likely a poor laborer or factory worker

Labour newspapers could arguably be a transition between traditional elitists newspapers and the penny press. These papers were of more interest to factory workers. They often advertized jobs, dealt with workers issues, conditions and reforms as well as reporting on local news.

The goal of the labour papers was to educate, inform and instruct factory workers. Even though the language of these papers was more accessible to the lower classes, the hefty 6 cent price tag per issuse made purchasing a paper on a daily basis unattainable for many people.

The ultimate goal of any newspaper is, and always has been, to communicate their message to their audience. When the penny paper stepped onto the newspaper scene the style and content of the message as well as the target audience was forever changed.

Section 3:

Benjamin Day was the official founder of the penny press in 1833. Day never actually intended to be in the newspaper business and only published his first issue of "The Sun" in order to promote his publishing business. This first issue was anything but late breaking news. Day literally cut stories and ads out of other newspapers that were 2 or 3 days old.

Day set his price competitively at a penny and sent newspaper boys to the street corners to sell them. This combination is what likely made Day an overnight success.

14. Within the week Day was no longer stealing stories and hired his own writer. Within the month his newspaper had its own logo and slogan "The Sun... it shines for all. Initially Day was selling 1000 papers daily, within the year the total rose to 10,000 and by 1835 the Sun's readership had reached 15,000 readers daily.

The price wasn't the only difference between traditional newspapers and the penny press. Size was also an important factor. Traditional newspapers were large sheets that required a table to be read. The penny press papers used much smaller pieces of paper allowing readers to literally read their newspapers everywhere.

With the success of the Sun, competition began to spring up. Day's biggest competition was James Gordon Bennett of the NY Herald established in 1835. Soon these two newspaper moguls began trying to out-scoop one another for the most outrageous and scandalous stories to attract readership.

The content of these papers was also very different from traditional papers. Where traditional papers focused on politics and business, the penny press had more of an entertainment undertone and appealed to a larger demographic. The tone of the paper was quite often more gossip-like and the majority of the news was crime and crisis-based.

The penny press thrived on all things sensational. On a daily basis stories were written about the happenings at the police station and courts reporting wild tales about friends and neighbours. Reporters would write follow-ups in subsequent issues to further interest readers and drag out the drama.

Perhaps the most famous sensationalized story printed in the Penny press was the Moon Hoax of 1835. The Moon hoax was a series of 6 articles published in the Sun by journalist Richard Adams Locke. These stories contained details of a "new scientific study made in South Africa by an astronomer who found life on the moon in the form of man-bats.

While we may now shake our heads in amazement that anyone would believe this, many if not most readers didn't question the authenticity of this article. This was the first ever hoax printed in the media and it played on the love of sensationalism in the 19th century.

Even when the moon hoax was discovered as a ruse, the majority of readers and other newspapers praised Locke and the Sun for their creativity. The thoughts about the story went along the lines of, if it is real then it is exciting, if it isn't true then it is entertaining.

Bennett did not react to this story in the same way. He was outraged at the lies printed in the Sun and published his thoughts on the matter. Thus began discussions about what news was, who the audience was and what the expectations around reality in the news.

Bennett argued that there was a delicate balance between the entertaining sensational stories and needing to uphold some sense of reality and truth. The moon hoax had tipped this balance in the wrong direction.

While Bennett was quick to accuse Day of fraud with the moon hoax, he also can be seen as falling into the trap of printing lies in order to sell Papers. Bennett knowingly defended the innocence of Axe Murderer Richard Robinson in his paper who was responsible for murdering prostitute Helen Jewett.

Bennett knew that Robinson was guilty yet printed information claiming his innocence and pointing fingers to a police cover up. Bennett fashioned his tale in a way he knew the middle classes, who Robinson was a part of, would like in order to gain their readership. In this, he was successful.

Printing Stories of sensationalized murder and fictitious scientific discoveries is probably why the editors of newspapers like the Sun and NY Herald were accused of lowering journalistic standards, pandering to the lowest tastes and reveling in the most lurid of stories.

Yet in spite of the drama readers kept buying papers. Not only were readers getting local and international news, they were also being entertained. The writing in the penny papers claimed to be objective as reporters appeared to fairly represent everyone, yet there was little difference in the way news stories and editorials were presented.

The content of the penny press was certainly a product of its time. The penny press had tremendous influence over the general population and therefore can be seen as reflecting the feelings of popular culture.

Not all stories in the penny press were outrageous. Christian sermons were also often published in these papers reflecting the dominant culture of the time. Many discussions were regarding slavery and women's rights were also included in the penny press.

Section 4:

The penny press certainly was a product of its time and culture but it has had a lasting impact as well. The penny press has been credited with bringing investigative journalism to America. It is also credited with democratizing the press by sidestepping the control of the elite and opening up a whole new realm of information.

The early publishers of the penny press were firm believers in equality. Everyone had the same right to access news and information. They believed that all citizens had the right to be informed of what was happening in the world and to be able to form their own opinions on these matters.

The goal of the penny press was very much to give people the facts on which they could form their own opinion and remove the power of knowledge from the wealthy and redistribute it to the lower classes.

With its goal the penny press blurred the lines of social status, giving more importance to the middle and working classes. By creating new target audience the penny press can be seen as an agent of social change as well as an agent of mass communication.

The penny press also had an impact on helping define what news is, the difference between fact and fiction and exactly where the line was to be drawn in terms of journalism. From stories like the moon hoax and the Helen Jewett murder we can see that even though lines were blurred, expectations were being set up for what the journalistic standards that reporters would have to follow.

The newspapers kept each other accountable, quite often openly attacking one another in print when they believed lines were crossed at the expense of duping readers. The penny press also forced traditional 6 cent newspapers to adapt to their model of journalism in order to retain their readership.

Arguably the penny press also had an impact on the expansion of literature. Contemporary writers like E.A. Poe responded to some of the articles published in the penny press noting that this new form of journalism had an impact on fiction. The penny press certainly did provide a more educated middle and working class with more leisure time the opportunity to purchase inexpensive print.

Section 5:

The penny press would not have been possible without exploiting newly available technologies. Prior to the 1830s the hand cranked press was used. This type of printing press allowed for 1000 sheets of paper to be printed on a daily basis.

When the speed or steam press was invented it allowed newspapermen like Day and Bennett to be able to print up to 1000 sheets per hour, making it possible to circulate 10,000 papers daily. Advances in paper production also helped the penny press. Using large rolls of paper rather than individual sheets helped expedite the printing process.

To be profitable in later years they reporters needed to scoop others stories. To do this they used boats to meet ships of shore as they were coming in from Europe, the pony express, trained carrier pigeons and later the telegraph to source information for stories. Furthermore trains, pony express and boats were also used to distribute the newspapers out of the city as well.

Section 6 Conclusion:

The penny press changed the look and feel of newspapers. By changing the content from political and business to human-interest stories and sensationalized crimes the audience shifted from the elite to the commoners. These newspapers appealed to a much broader audience, simultaneously entertaining and informing.

Perhaps the most notable contribution of the penny press to present day journalism is the impact the penny press had on journalistic standards and defining what news was. This new type of newspaper had a more literate population and advances in technology to thank for its success.

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