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Setting the Agenda in the Antebellum Era

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Various source media: Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers



During the tumultuous 1790s, printer Philip Freneau declared that “public opinion sets the bounds to every government, and is the real sovereign of every free one.”¹ Looking back a generation in 1815, John Adams reminded his one-time opponent from Virginia, Thomas Jefferson, that America’s revolution from Britain was not fought with gunpowder and musket balls, but with “the pamphlets [and] newspapers in all the colonies . . . by which the public opinion was enlightened and informed concerning the authority of Parliament over the colonies.”² Five years earlier, in 1810, Isaiah Thomas published America’s first history of journalism. In it, he said that newspapers “have become the vehicles of discussion, in which the principles of government, the interest of nations, the spirit and tendency of public measures . . . are all arraigned, tried, and decided.”³

Though all three were looking at a time before the period we refer to as the antebellum era, each accurately described the growing power of the press in America. If three dozen papers could incite a revolution against the world’s strongest empire, imagine what thousands of papers could do to inform a nation in a time when the bottom line of the ledger mattered, but causes, issues, and ideals meant more. If you can, then you can understand how the press of the antebellum period set the agenda for the nation.

¹ *National Gazette* (Philadelphia, Pa.), 19 December 1791.

² John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 1815, quoted in Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 1.

³ Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America* (1810; reprint, New York, 1970), 18-19. Thomas quoted directly from Samuel Miller, *A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1803), II:251-255.

⁴ Numbers are based on Alfred McClung Lee, *The Daily Newspaper in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1937); Edward Connery Lathem, comp., *Chronological Tables of American Newspapers, 1690-1820* (Barre, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society & Barre Publishers, 1972); Carol Sue

Numbers are important to this phenomenon. In 1820, 512 newspapers were published regularly in America with a circulation of slightly less than 300,000. By 1860, about 3,000 newspapers were regularly published with circulation reaching nearly 1.5 million. Magazines grew at an even more phenomenal rate. A dozen magazines were published in 1800. By 1860 that number grew to 1,000.⁴ Visitors to the United States observed the power of the press. Alexis de Tocqueville explained its power when he wrote following his early 1831-1832 tour of the nation that the press “rallies the interests of the community round certain principles and draws up the creed of every party.”⁵ And what were the interests of the nation? Slavery, moral and social reform, women’s rights, burgeoning immigration, religion, economic depression, urbanization, public education, westward expansion, the desire to hold onto a more agrarian lifestyle, and what might happen to a republic that was becoming increasingly polarized because of the issues that dominated the lines of newspapers and the conversations of many.

Newspaper growth had other effects on antebellum America. Prior to the Revolution, voting rates were low, with only 10 to 15 percent of eligible white males doing so in 1775.⁶ But, newspapers continued to grow, prosper, and discuss the issues that affected the direction of the nation. By the 1820s, people in various levels of society turned to papers to voice opinions. By

Humphrey, *The Press of the Young Republic, 1783-1833* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996); Wm. David Sloan and James D. Startt, *The Media in America: A History*, 4th ed. (North Port, Ala.: Vision Press), 250; and William E. Huntzicker, *The Popular Press, 1833-1865* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999), 170.

⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), 1:187-88.

⁶ Michael Shudson, “Was There Ever a Public Sphere? If So, When? Reflections on the American Case,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Craig Calhoun, ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 149.

the time of Andrew Jackson's presidency in 1829, more than 50 percent of American households subscribed to a newspaper; and approximately 44 percent of eligible voters participated in the 1832 election.⁷ Involvement in public debate by Americans through an expanding press and the rise in people voting cannot be coincidence. Jackson acknowledged this when elected president.

In 1824, Jackson won the majority of popular votes in America but failed to capture enough votes in the Electoral College to claim the White House. Deals between candidates gave John Quincy Adams the election in the House of Representatives. Many editors, especially those outside New England, felt political corruption had taken the election of president away from the people. One even said that "public opinion will eventually be respected by the election of the General."⁸ As a response to what they viewed as a Shanghaied presidency, editors mounted a campaign for change. Jackson noted the backlash to the election in the papers and followed the lead of America's press. He allowed editors to set the agenda. "The recent demonstration of public sentiment inscribes on the list of Executive duties, in characters too legible to be overlooked, the task of reform," Jackson said in his 1829 inaugural address.⁹ Jackson's press secretary Martin Van Buren, who succeeded "Old Hickory" as president in 1837, added, "Without a paper, we may

hang our harps on the willows."¹⁰ Van Buren meant that unless those in political power or who desire it had a venue to address the people, all their efforts would be futile.

The rapid growth of newspapers, of course, did not occur in a vacuum. It coincided with the mercuric rise in America's population. The antebellum period began with twenty-two states. By 1860 there were thirty-three. Even more dramatic was the growth of the nation's population, which increased by more than 210 percent. In 1820, America's population was slightly more than 10 million. By 1860, the population surpassed 31 million. Despite efforts to limit slavery through the Missouri Compromise, the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, and other legislation, the number of slaves grew, too. In 1820, census figures placed the slave population at more than 1.5 million. By 1860 it had swelled to nearly 4 million, an increase of more than 158 percent. Free African Americans by 1860, however, numbered less than 500,000.¹¹ Immigration in part fuelled America's population explosion after 1840. More than 1.7 million people entered America in the 1840s, and in the 1850s, that number jumped to more than 2.5 million.¹²

Three thousand newspapers and one thousand magazines for a population of 31 million people do not

⁷ William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New Britain, 1780-1835* (Knoxville, 1989), 193-94; Walter Dean Burnham, *The Current Crisis in American Politics* (New York, 1982), 129.

⁸ *Aurora* (Philadelphia), 2 February 1825.

⁹ Andrew Jackson, *The Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, John Spencer Bassett, ed., 7 vols. (Washington, D. C., 1926-35), 4:19.

¹⁰ Quoted in Culver H. Smith, *The Press, Politics, and Patronage: The American Government's Use of Newspapers 1789-1875* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977), 56.

¹¹ Study 00003: "Historical Demographic, Economic, and Social Data: U.S., 1790-1970." Anne Arbor: Inter- University Consortium for Political and Social Research. You may access the census records at an number of on-line sources including <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/> and <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>.

¹² John M. Blum, et. al., *The National Experience*, 6th ed., 2 vols. (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 1:310.

seem adequate, nor does a 1.5 million daily circulation, but the numbers are misleading. They omit weekly papers and their reach; the population contained a huge component of young people. According to census figures, 50 percent of all white Pennsylvanians in 1860 were 19 or younger, a ratio reflected in most states.¹³

If during the antebellum period, more than half of all homes received papers as William Gilmore maintains in *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life*, and those newspapers were read aloud in the home, their impact would have been great. People who subscribed to papers shared their newspapers with others, often ending up twenty to twenty-five miles from the subscriber's home. If every paper were shared with just one home, according to Gilmore's calculation, then the potential existed for 100 percent saturation of newspapers, something that would occur in circulation figures early in the twentieth century. If papers were read by multiple families, then the reach of the press was even greater. Consider this, also; newspapers were available in taverns and places of lodging for public reading and debate, so they became the focus of daily discussion as they were read aloud. One newspaper's contents, in this setting, could be heard by dozens of people. Looking at newspaper circulation figures in this way in relation to America's population helps explain why as early as 1825, a Virginian who proposed a new paper noted that "A thirst for newspaper reading prevails among all ranks of society throughout our country."¹⁴ And it sheds light on why Tocqueville could say with confidence that newspapers in the United

States "drop the same thought into a thousand minds at the same moment."¹⁵

Understanding newspaper penetration in society only explains part of the reason why the press set the agenda during the antebellum era. The press of the first half of the nineteenth century would blossom to create a venue for dialogue for nearly every segment of society, save those who were enslaved and perhaps a few others. First, the press entered the antebellum period as a medium of partisanship and patronage. American newspapers developed their partisan nature before the Revolution, and even though the "Era of Good Feelings" following the War of 1812 ended the Federalist party, political disputes did not disappear, especially on local levels. The political system of the day ensured that the party in power could reward its loyal editors by granting them government printing contracts and political office. The same privileges were granted on all levels in America, from the presidency to local councils.¹⁶ Even though political patronage died out and was officially ended by Congress in 1846, party politics did not, and newspapers throughout the antebellum period advocated one political ideology while often attacking vehemently others.

Publications did not limit their discussion during the antebellum period to politics. A great number of moral and ideological issues arose, and the press offered the perfect venue for discussion. Abolitionists turned to the press to address the issue of slavery. William Lloyd

¹³ "Historical Demographic, Economic, and Social Data: U.S., 1790-1970," <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census/>.

¹⁴ *Prospectus for Christian Journal* (Richmond), published in *Family Visitor* (Richmond), 8 October 1825.

¹⁵ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2:111.

¹⁶ David A. Copeland, "America, 1750-1820." *The Press and the Public Sphere: Politics and Social Change in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Europe and America*. Hannah Barker and Simon Burrows, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 210.

Garrison's promise of "I WILL BE HEARD"¹⁷ resonated through the nation. By 1835, more than one million antislavery publications were produced in New York City alone.¹⁸ Free blacks used the press, too, to fight against slavery and other social injustices. Before the Civil War about forty black newspapers were begun. Often, they were started by African American ministers and educators, like Samuel Cornish and John Russworm, who published the first black-run newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, beginning in 1827. Black newspapers railed against slavery, but they fought for civil rights, pride, education, and progress for African Americans even more.¹⁹ The burgeoning immigrant population was not omitted, either. A huge foreign-language press existed, especially in cities that became the center for a particular ethnic group. Religious groups used the press, too. Early in the antebellum period, a religious press grew and competed successfully with secular papers.²⁰ Religious newspapers looked like their secular counterparts, and they published the same news. They also discussed theology and morality, along with group-specific subject matter. The 1850 Census listed 191 religious newspapers or periodicals in America,²¹ and religious journalism, according to one source, may have accounted for three-fourths of America's reading material in 1840.²² The press soon provided a voice for nearly every cause or occupation in America. The Industrial Revolution provided America with a new job market, and labor newspapers began to address the circumstances of factory workers. These publications

soon expanded to cover the needs of various professions, from bankers to miners. Agricultural newspapers sought ways to help farmers. Other specialized publications addressed inventions and discoveries aimed at making life easier.²³

Among magazines, perhaps the greatest development was periodicals for women. Sara Josepha Hale began the first magazine for women, the *Ladies Magazine*, in 1828. Numerous other titles followed, but Godey's *Lady's Book*, founded in Philadelphia in 1830, was the most widely read. It had a circulation of 150,000 before the Civil War.²⁴ In 1848, the first women's rights convention met in Seneca Falls, New York. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott turned to the press as a means of sharing what took place there. Though scorned by most printers in 1848, following the second women's convention in Worcester, Massachusetts, some editors began to listen. Horace Greeley even wrote, "That the full and equal enjoyment of Political Franchises would improve the lot of Woman, may be doubtful; but we are willing to give the Democratic theory a full and fair trial."²⁵

And then there were the penny papers. "The object of this paper is to lay before the public, at a price within the means of every one, ALL THE NEWS OF THE DAY," Benjamin Day announced in the *Sun* on September 3, 1833. Within six months Day's circulation reached

¹⁷ *Liberator* (Boston), 1 January 1831.

¹⁸ Thomas Leonard, *News for All: America's Coming-of-Age with the Press* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 67.

¹⁹ See, "The Abolitionist Press, in Wm David Sloan and David A. Copeland, *Mass Media: A Documentary History*.

²⁰ Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism. A History: 1690-1960*, 3rd ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), 206.

²¹ Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines, 1741-1850* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 342.

²² Benjamin P. Browne, *Christian Journalism for Today* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1952), 14.

²³ Huntzicker, *The Popular Press*, 56-60.

²⁴ Mott, *American Journalism*, 320.

²⁵ Horace Greeley, "Remarks to 'A,'" *New York Daily Tribune*, 2 November 1850.

nearly 8,000. Within three years the *Sun's* circulation was nearly 30,000. Other New York publishers followed Day's lead and either changed their publications to penny papers or started them, 35 in New York City alone by 1838.

Penny papers changed other facets of journalism other than paper cost. The four-page penny paper did not remain small for long. Their popularity and ad revenue ensured that. Editors needed copy and began to hire reporters to cover "beats" to fill the pages. They also honed the editorial during this period. News of moon men and gruesome murders was good for circulation, but so, too, were opinion pieces. Just as editors of the political papers used their newspapers as platforms for the nation's political and social agendas, the editors of the penny papers did the same. Horace Greeley was perhaps the greatest editorial voice of the era, but nearly all newspapers allowed their columns to serve as platform for opinion and debate, following an American tradition that dated back to the colonial era. The growing moral, social, and political issues of the antebellum period, combined with the rapid growth in the numbers of newspapers and their circulations, produced the ideal avenue for public debate, often called the public sphere. More people sought ways to insert themselves into public discussions, especially as more trade and industry created a more influential middle class. They discovered that the press was the best way to do this, no doubt following a long tradition in American history.²⁶ The press served as the catalyst

for public deliberations in settings ranging from public gathering spots to homes, from public ceremony and oration to private conversations.²⁷ Because of the breadth of societal elements creating publications, the printed and disseminated word became a storehouse for all types of information that was of value. Because of the increased number of papers, their increased circulation, technological advancements in printing and dissemination of information like the telegraph, and the great interest most Americans took in the issues and events that were affecting their lives, the press assumed a position where it was able to set the agenda of the nation, or at least provide a place where it could be debated on broad scale.

In 1835, James Gordon Bennett declared, "This is the age of the Daily Press, inspired with the accumulated wisdom of past ages, enriched with the spoils of history, and looking forward to a millennium of a thousand years, the happiest and most splendid ever yet known in the measured span of eternity!"²⁸ Bennett was wrong when he claimed the times would be "the happiest and most splendid ever yet known in the measured span of eternity!" But he was correct in declaring the antebellum period the age of the press. Though other time periods have legitimately claimed the same, the power of the antebellum press to keep in front of the people the issues of the day was truly impressive. As Tocqueville said, "their influence in the long run becomes irresistible."²⁹

²⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: A Structural Transformation of Bourgeois Society*, tran. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1989), 29.

²⁷ Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1989), 292. See also David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes:*

The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues & Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

²⁸ James Gordon Bennett, *New York Herald*, 6 May 1835.

²⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1:186-88.

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