US Newspaper Types, the Newsroom, and the Division of Labor, 1750-2000

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The culture of the newsroom in the United States developed in the context of overall changes in the network of material and imagined relationships that constituted the newspaper.

In our book, The Form of News, we construct a timeline of newspaper “formations.” A formation comes about through the articulation of several dimensions of newspaper form: style, type, and ideal. Style refers to the visual characteristics of a newspaper. Type refers to all of the things that go into making a newspaper: its machinery, its business plan, its division of labor; one might also call this its “mode of production.” Ideal refers to the dominant notion of what a newspaper is supposed to do. The ideal is often expressed through a dominant metaphor. Table 1 presents a summary of the series of newspaper types and ideals—the two most important dimensions of this complicated history for this paper’s discussion.

TABLE ONE: TIMELINE OF US NEWSPAPER TYPES AND IDEALS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1700</th>
<th>1820</th>
<th>1850</th>
<th>1880</th>
<th>1910</th>
<th>1950</th>
<th>1980</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Printer’s Paper</td>
<td>Editor’s Paper</td>
<td>Publisher’s Paper</td>
<td>Industrial Paper</td>
<td>Professional Paper</td>
<td>Corporate Paper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal</td>
<td>Town meeting</td>
<td>Courtroom</td>
<td>Marketplace</td>
<td>Department Store</td>
<td>Social Map</td>
<td>Index</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The culture of the newsroom has accrued over time as layers of practices and ideals from different formations have sedimented on top of each other. We turn now to a narrative overview of these changing types and ideals.

Early American newspapers were printer’s newspapers. The chief figure in the production
of the newspaper was the printer, who selected the content, writing some of it him or her self, and, with the help of a few workers, set the type, pressed the pages, distributed the paper, managed the subscription list and advertising accounts, and usually ran other printing jobs and a book shop on the side. With such a diverse bundle of tasks, a printer would not likely devote complex attention to reporting, editing, or designing the paper. Content consisted of what came to hand, whether through the mails, in other newspapers, or from correspondents.

Printers arranged their news according to where they got it, starting with the most distant points of transmission and moving close. In colonial Boston, for instance, news from Europe, and especially from the London newspapers, came first, followed by news from the Americas, then North America, then finally local news. All of the news gathered from a particular locality would be printed under a locational head. So a large LONDON would be followed by dated entries, signalling to the reader that this item, which might concern a battle in Spain on March 10, appeared in a London newspaper on March 17. LONDON might be followed by BARBADOS and PHILADELPHIA, NEW YORK, PROVIDENCE, and finally BOSTON, where the printer would include original material, and perhaps even a sentiment or two.

Printers spent most of their time working on producing “neat” or “tidy” pages. For the most part, they had the ideal of the book in mind, and wanted their papers to read comfortably like a book for readers who, they presumed, would read every word. Because these papers were only four pages long, this expectation was reasonable.

But the four-page paper (and this length would remain the norm for all but the largest newspapers until the 1890s) did not feature prime material on p. 1. Because of the technics of printing, printers tended to print the outside pages first, then do the inside pages. This practice allowed them to collect and print older and more durable matter, including recurring ads, first, then do the most recent matter last. The most timely matter (the BOSTON head, especially)
appeared on the inside, on p. 2 or p. 3. When the paper was folded, the outside pages, with drier
ink, would be the ones that carriers or postal officers would handle. And readers would then be
likely to turn first to the inside pages, and read the paper inside out.

The look of the printer’s newspaper thus expressed a specific type, or mode of production.
It also expressed a news sociology.

The passive newsgathering, the bookish style, and many other features of the printer’s
newspaper (high cost, overwrought diction) indicated that it considered its audience to be
gentlemen. The matter of the newspaper required a fairly high initial cultural and political
literacy for any reader to really make sense of it. So the colonial newspapers appears upon
reflection to present itself as a virtual coffeehouse. It provided a simulation of the experience
that a commercial gentleman would undergo on a visit to a good coffeehouse, one that featured a
broad range of browsing material and an intelligent and talkative clientele. A visitor to such a
place would pick up the most important papers first, then scan down to the local news,
meanwhile picking up opinions and commentary from fellow gentlemen. The visitor, then, like
the reader, would feel affirmed in his (rarely her) membership in an informed elite group.

The revolutionary controversy modified this sociology. The newspaper retained much of its
look, but now it was supposed to energize and support a political movement, meaning it was to
be read by a larger number of people, and to provide controversial justifications. After the
Revolution, the broader publicness of the newspaper was retained to supply a source of
legitimacy for government--the continual representation of popular consent. Political thinkers
like Thomas Jefferson envisioned a press system that would allow for the transparent formation
of public opinion through universal information and universal access to deliberation. The master
metaphor for the press became the town meeting.

The coffeehouse metaphor and the town meeting metaphor assumed a rational and
discerning public. Implied are deep unvoiced assumptions about race, class, gender, and party. The readership of the printer’s paper was generally assumed to be white, male, propertied, and non-partisan—in other words, gentlemen. The etiquette of the printer’s paper—the insistent ritual of disclaiming impartiality and impersonality, even by printers with clear party affiliations—underscores these assumptions. In this sense, the printer’s newspaper had inscribed in its form a deep social and political ignorance or delusion.

Newspapers could not remain a gentleman’s medium—if they ever in fact were so. Economic and ideological factors encouraged expansion. But the largest impetus for popularization came from the rise of popular politics. The post-revolutionary generation of politicoes were drawn to partisanism and developed a political culture that cast permanent partisan competition as a positive good rather than an occasional and barely tolerable evil. The Age of Jackson enjoyed a good campaign, and the campaign became the tail that wagged the dog of the governing process.

The rise of popular politics, occurring unevenly in different parts of the country but in the ascendant nationally by the mid 1820s, needed and used the press. By this time, newspapers had become sufficiently numerous that any populous locality could support more than one. Party competition thus became a functional component of economic competition. Competing newspapers used party affiliation (and usually cash subsidies) to add value to their product—the market helped newspapers align with the new politics. And the parties wanted their papers to appeal to broader audiences. Consequently, they subsidized (in effect) the editorial department. The Age of Jackson was also the great age of the editor. Party enthusiasts, often without training in printing, took over as editors of party papers, composing editorials and selecting material from other newspapers to consistently promote a party line or boost the candidacy of a party leader. As a result, any party’s newspapers would form a national network—all of their editors
exchanged free copies with each other, copied choice paragraphs from each other, and coordinated rhetorical and informational tactics. Hezekiah Niles referred to this as the manufacture of public opinion. (Niles, 1834)

The partisan newspaper worked by a new master metaphor, the courtroom. The newspaper acted as an advocate for a candidate or party, like a lawyer in the courtroom. The public appeared as a jury. Unlike the town meeting metaphor, the newspaper was supposed to be active and the public passive. When it came time for the public to act, it would not be in the public forum of the press, or in an act of deliberation, but in the quasi-private setting of a polling place; the public would then act as individuals and not as a deliberative body. Meanwhile, the agents conducting public deliberation, the editors of the party organs, would construct their arguments so as to include only that matter that would contribute to their client’s eventual victory.

Partisan newspapers organized news in a hierarchical stream of paragraphs. Like earlier newspapers, party papers were almost universally four pages in length, and put the prime material on the inside pages, pages 2 and 3. Unlike earlier papers, though, partisan papers preferred national politics to global history as their organizing narrative, and preferred editorials to news items. So, on the inside pages, the leading items, appearing under a column-wide nameplate, were original editorial paragraphs, followed by clipped items from other newspapers, each introduced by the editor, and usually attributed to another newspaper in a small italic line either above or below the item.

By 1830 U.S. newspapers had acquired a reputation overseas for punch and popularity. The U.S. led the world in total newspaper titles and newspaper copies per capita. Tocqueville noted both the quantity and (low) quality of U.S. newspapers, pointing out their aggressiveness and vulgarity. (DeTocqueville, vol 1, ch. 11) Indeed, U.S. newspapers thought in units of a paragraph, for the most part, and editors prided themselves on their ability to pack a complete
argument into a tidy square of type.

All of this preceded the intense commercialization of the press that occurred in the 1830s. It is a truism in US journalism history that the urban penny papers of that decade produced the first modern newspapers. In fact, historians have exaggerated the difference between penny papers and partisan papers; the two might better be understood as complementary moments of newspaper development. (Nerone, 1987)

But the confluence of market forces and party energies in the antebellum years introduced an unstable dialectic. Partisanism, feeding off mass politics, and riding on the postal system, implied a system rooted in the distributive logic of the republic--one person, one vote. Commercialism, feeding off the market revolution, and riding on the new communication and transportation technologies of the telegraph and railroad, implied a system rooted in the distributive logic of the marketplace--one dollar, one vote. Partisanism pushed a decentralized and open-ended newspaper system. Commercialization pushed a system concentrated in the largest cities, a system in which the largest newspapers would be able to turn their content into a commodity to be sold to other newspapers.

Eventually the commercial impulse overwhelmed the partisan one. This yielded hybrid newspapers, papers that featured a partisan newspaper in the middle sandwiched between two slices of commercial news--a front page that featured the latest news from the wire services and a back page that featured city items, local market information, and ads. In the largest cities, dailies expanded to eight pages; the editor’s newspaper continued to occupy pages 4 and 5. The editor’s paper never disappeared, although today it is confined to the editorial and op-ed pages. And it retains its claim to being the heart of a newspaper. But its control over the rest of the newspaper has continually declined, until, in web versions of newspapers, it’s virtually invisible.

Instead, the publisher’s function became the key to the identity of the newspaper. We see
this happening as early as the 1850s, also the time when we begin to discern the characteristic look of the Victorian newspaper. The dominant metaphor shifted from the courtroom to the marketplace. Newspapers began to stock themselves like aggressive shops. They cultivated miscellany, like a general store, and gradually they began to think of their front pages as shop windows, though this process, given a head start by the Civil War, receded, and did not take root until the 1870s. The publisher’s newspaper was also more aggressive in gathering news, hiring reporters and buying wire service and syndicate copy.

It is in the transition to the publisher’s newspaper that one begins to see dedicated space to the editorial and repertorial workers separated from the “counting room,” on the one hand, and the “mechanical department,” on the other. The metropolitan newspapers of the 1850s probably had rooms that we might call newsrooms, though they did not have a name for them. Smaller newspapers did not have a wall between the counting room and editorial desk space. Likewise, newspapers without noisy power presses did not need to separate off space for writing. Steam presses, present in large metropolitan newspapers by the 1850s, remained too expensive for smaller papers for several decades.

The publisher’s paper in turn yielded to the industrial newspaper. Industrialization, like the rise of mass politics and the market revolution, produced deep systemic changes in the ways newspapers were produced. Mass production through new machines and mass distribution to ever larger readerships, required because of new enormous fixed costs, and subsidized by new mass advertisers (like department stores), required massive regular supplies of content, which in turn required the industrialization of newswork.

The industrial newspaper refigured itself as a civic institution. Newspapers sponsored promotions of other sorts as well--the crusades that made Pulitzer famous, like building the pedestal for the Statue of Liberty, for example. They also commissioned marches, which were
performed on civic occasions, like the Fourth of July. But most important was the changing physical plant of the newspaper. Needing larger quarters to house its increasingly expensive machinery and extensive staff, the daily newspaper built showcase buildings encrusted with iconography, which doubled as functional loci of production and as inescapable promotions. Inside these monumental buildings, an increasingly elaborate separation of spaces occurred.

The industrialization of the newspaper altered the master metaphor from market to department store. Instead of competing in the marketplace with all the other newspapers, a paper invited readers into its pages, so they might browse the various departments, all the while enjoying an artificial atmosphere of worldliness and control. Coincidentally, department stores and other large advertisers bought display ads that expanded the number of pages and the graphic capabilities of the newspaper while driving its division into sections. By the 1920s, typical urban dailies had pages for sports that featured automobile ads, pages for amusements that featured play and movie ads, and pages for women that featured grocery store and clothing ads.

Industrialization introduced economies of scale that moved the news industry as a whole toward monopoly. Urban markets showed the characteristics of natural monopoly by 1920, while similar tendencies appeared earlier in the wire services. The number of daily newspapers in the US peaked in 1909 and declined steadily afterwards, with a rapid downturn during the great depression. Meanwhile, as the power of news magnates grew, so did popular suspicions. The combination of power and criticism, added to the occupational ambitions of reporters, impelled the embrace of professional values.

The professional newspaper was a reporter’s newspaper. But the reporter was no longer a scavenger. He (usually) was an expert, a privileged observer of the social and political scene, whose job it was to explain to an underinformed public what they needed to know to be competent citizens. The professional reporter would be a supercitizen. The first generation of
professionalized reporters--Lincoln Steffens and David Graham Phillips and the other stalwarts of the muckrake era--certainly styled themselves as such. As experts, they deserved a byline, not to lay claim to authorship, but to reassure the public that their authorship didn’t matter.

Professionalism intersected with other elements of the modern and modernism to produce a newspaper that would work as a social map. Streamlined in appearance and displaying clear hierarchy and segmentation, the modern newspaper looked like an authoritative representation of the social world, in the same way that modern reporting adopted a pose of neutral expertise (rather than authorship or storytelling) and modern photojournalism the same.

The modern moment, and with it the reporter’s or professional newspaper, has ended or is ending—it’s hard to discern just where the caesura will rest. But it is clear that the ideals of the modern newspaper and the ideologies of the professional reporter require a consensus and a level of monopoly that no longer exist, and it is also clear that, on the political economic level, the autonomy of newspapers from other forms of media and businesses has eroded. As journalists complain that “MBAs rule the newsroom” (Underwood, 1993) it becomes clearer than ever that they lack the independence and autonomy to deploy professional values. And competition from other news providers has created an incoherence in the news environment that makes it impossible for newspapers to comfortably map the world, as well as to maintain an appearance of political neutrality. On talk radio, on cable television, and on the internet we have seen already a return to the age of the editor’s paper, I think.

These newspaper types are abstract ideal types; historically, these different newspapers have nested within each other in complicated ways. In the national newspaper system, leading papers will be of the most advanced type, but will work synergistically with regional, minority, or ethnic newspapers of other formations. The major metropolitan dailies, and especially the New York dailies, have always been near the leading edge of newspaper development (though they tend to
adopt innovations that had been pioneered previously in the provinces). Regional dailies and weeklies might lag, or might follow a different trajectory of development altogether. As dailies industrialized in the second half of the nineteenth century, for instance, African American newspapers differentiated to become supplementary journals of opinion—put in the terms of the newspaper formations outlined above, they became editor’s papers—partly in response to the industrialization of mainstream dailies. Frederick Douglass and the post-Civil War African American editors that Booker T. Washington subsidized recognized their “colonial” situation and made the most of it. (On the Bookerites, see Kreiling, 1991.) Meanwhile, even in the most professional or corporate newspaper, there remains a vestige of the editor’s paper—usually confined to the two pages that carry leading editorials, letters to the editor, and op-ed columns.

The Development of the Newsroom

The term “newsroom” made sense in its modern usage only after editorial work became separated from mechanical work. This occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century. Prior to that time, the term “newsroom” existed, but referred to a public room where newspapers were read—the sort of room that was commonly maintained in a hotel or tavern. This usage is European in origin, and appears in the US press in the reports of European correspondents. Its first usage in the New York Times in the modern sense comes from a review of Henry Justin Smith’s novel Deadlines in 1923 (NYT, 7 January 1923, Book Review section, p. 17).

As we’ve already noted, two key moments of division have been foundational: first, the separation of mechanical from editorial work; and second, the separation of the business office from the newsroom. The first was figured in the move from the printer’s to the editor’s paper, but did not really become firm until the end of the nineteenth century. In the meantime, the
interpenetration of mechanical and editorial work continued, helped by the fact that editors often came from the ranks of practical printers.

In the memoirs and obituaries of nineteenth century editors and other newsworkers, it is not uncommon to find references to early training in typesetting. That the mechanical part of the craft remained entwined with the editorial work is shown by numerous references to learning to compose copy “at the case,” which writers like Greeley and Twain claimed to have done. Though clearly associated with the provincial press by the mid nineteenth-century, the apparent ubiquity of this practice clearly underscores the fact that editorial work was not considered divorced from presswork. We have never run across a reference to composing copy at a linotype machine, however. By the end of the nineteenth century, editorial personnel would have their own machine to work at, i.e. the manual typewriter. The impact of the typewriter on the conditions of newswork must have been immense. Prior to its introduction, the use of loose newsprint for notetaking and composition left editorial workers free to move around to whatever horizontal surface was available, including space that housed presses also. The typewriter anchored newsworkers to table space. Banks of typewriters on long tables shared by many workers characterized newsrooms in the industrial newspaper. Hardt and Brennen note the industrial nature of newsrooms. (Hardt and Brennen, 1999) Photos show them to be similar to textile sweatshops, with typewriters in the place of sewing machines. Were one to tell the story solely by reference to technology, the telephone freed reporters from their desks, allowing them to roam the city freely and phone in facts to “re-write men” [sic].

The mechanical employees unionized; although their unions split along occupational lines, with pressmen coming to be organized separately from typesetters or compositors, they retained a strong sense of collective interest. This is impressive, considering the great migratory fluctuations in press work, with typesetters following the seasons and moving frequently
according to other market conditions. The books of the Galveston Typographical Union show a level of mobility that would amount to 1/3 turnover annually. (Galveston Typographical Union records) Editorial employees never approached this level of unionization in the States, despite continued complaints over working conditions and compensation. Instead, considering themselves individual intellectual producers, reporters and editors sought to achieve a “manly” [sic] independence through first political (in the age of the editor’s and publisher’s paper) and then professional identity. (Leab, 1970)

The second division was hinted at early, but it was only in the second decade of the twentieth century that the wall of separation between advertising and news, a key component of this division, was institutionalized. Prior to that, newworkers and critics alike recognized the continual battle between the interests of the “counting room” and news-editorial matter. (Warren, 1863, p. 100; Warner, 1881) Occasionally, campaigns for legislation aimed at making the influences of advertisers and owners transparent appeared, culminating in the 1912 Newspaper Publicity Act. (Lawson, 1993) By that time, a standard rhetoric of independence had been perfected, though apparently it was little believed and frequently violated. This rhetoric of independence was institutionalized in codes of ethics, written by newspapers, publisher’s associations, and professional associations, culminating in the Code of the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1922. (Walker, 1934, pp. 167-85.)

The culture of the newsroom developed along with changes in newspaper type, following upon the grand separations of news/editorial matter from business/advertising activities and mechanical processes. In the beginning, the printer performed all of these activities. In the editor’s newspaper, the separation between mechanical and news/editorial commenced, although it was not complete until the appearance of the industrial newspaper. In the publisher’s newspaper, the separation of advertising/business activities from new/editorial commenced, but
was not complete until the appearance of the professional newspaper. In the course of
development of these separations, a division of labor gradually appeared in news/editorial. Its
mature form is reflected in Figure One, an organizational chart of newspaper operations drawn
from a catalog of newspaper occupations appearing in Willard G. Bleyer’s landmark 1913
textbook, Newspaper Writing and Editing. (Bleyer, 1913)

FIGURE ONE
ORGANIZATIONAL CHART OF THE TYPICAL METROPOLITAN DAILY, CA. 1913
(HAND DRAWN)

The Editor as Newworker

The key newworker in US newspapers from the beginning of the nineteenth century to at
least the 1850s was the editor. The editor’s function was most fully developed in the newspaper
type we call the editor’s paper, when the purpose of the newspaper was understood as primarily
partisan.

In the editor’s paper, a single editor performed a complicated bundle of tasks. He
(sometimes she) became editor by virtue of being a party activist, and was expected to participate
vigorously in party organizing, often chairing or being secretary to party meetings and
conventions, frequently holding an appointed patronage post, and sometimes running for elected
office. (Baldasty, 1993, Pasley, 2001) At the same time, the editor was responsible for selecting
and composing the matter in the paper, and for writing original paragraphs. Most of the matter
in the paper was copied verbatim from other newspapers, which arrived in the mail through free
was more important than original writing for most editors. Mark Twain summarized his work editing a newspaper thus: “After having been at work from nine or ten in the morning until eleven at night scraping material together, I took the pen and spread this much out in words and phrases and made it cover as much acreage as I could. It was fearful drudgery, soulless drudgery, and almost destitute of interest.” (quoted in Fishkin, 1985, p. 8.)

As one anonymous British commentator remarked, “The editor of an American newspaper, writing but little, is, in almost every other sense, a working-man. In general, the control of every department in the establishment is vested in him alone; he keeps the books, receives and pays out money, takes the advertisements, and, on an emergency, can sometimes turn compositor. When he enters with zeal into his task, his labors are of the most multifarious description. He must attend all political meetings of his own party, and must be found in the van of practical out-door politicians. He is always expected to be an orator, and is generally an oracle. ... His field also extends to the committee-room and the secret ‘caucus.’”

This author goes on to note that the editor functioned very much as the public face of his or her paper: “the editors are all well known, and assailed respectively by one another.” (Anonymous, 1845, p 731) The partisan attachments of the typical daily persisted until at least the end of the nineteenth century, though a rhetoric of independence was adopted earlier. However, the editor’s prominence began to fade as the publisher’s paper yielded to the industrial paper. (Kaplan, 2002)

In the editor’s paper, the editor was also expected to be its business manager. Editor’s often were not so good at this part of the job, and found themselves continually hounding delinquent subscribers and partisan financial backers for money. However, well into mid-century, an editor could insure a newspaper’s viability by holding together a comparatively small number of like-minded subscribers around politically correct material. The editor’s paper survived the
appearance of a more commercialized press in the form of the publisher’s paper.

Few individuals could excel at all the skills--political, business, literary, and mechanical--bundled into the editor’s position. So as newspapers increased in size, editors began hiving off their duties to other functionaries. Horace Greeley, perhaps the most famous of the partisan editors, formed a strategic partnership with Thomas McElrath in 1841, leaving the business operations of the New York Tribune to him. This maneuver is often seen as an emblematic moment in the emergence of modern business methods in the newspaper.

Greeley and McElrath also pioneered another arrangement, the formation of the newspaper as a joint stock company. In 1848, they offered 100 shares of stock at $1000 apiece to seven of the newspapers long-time employees and managers. Although joint-stock ownership of newspapers had already become common, this was the first recorded distribution of shares of this nature. Other New York newspapers followed suit in the 1850s. (Titter, 2000, pp. 102-3.)

By the second half of the nineteenth century, editorial tasks became increasingly divided and specialized. The newspaper began to exhibit a three-part division of news/editorial matter according to mode of transmission (rather than by topic). One part was the traditional editor’s newspaper, which consisted of original paragraphs plus news clipped from exchange papers and “correspondence,” which referred to any copy sent in by mail. This part was initially the province of a single editor, but then the specialized chairs that Bleyer’s catalog notes appeared: the exchange editor, the correspondence editor, and what would now be called the editorial page editor.

A second part was news transmitted by telegraph. Initially a single one-column digest of all telegraphic news, this column of the newspaper was handled in a manner similar to the exchange papers. By the time Bleyer composed his catalog, the function of the telegraph editor had been modified to include supervision of correspondents, then sending dispatches by telegraph rather
than by mail. Eventually the “telegraphic” aspect of this chair was replaced by the topical element—this editor would handle news from remote places, i.e. national and international news.

The third part was original reporting from local markets, courts, and city hall. In the leading dailies, each part had an editor with sub-editors working underneath. The city editor oversaw the increasingly complex operation of gathering local news. Under the domain of the city editor, a night editor (for morning newspapers) ran the copy desk, which employed copy editors whose job it was to re-work original reporting. (Solomon, 1995) Although Bleyer doesn’t use these terms, by 1920 it was standard to refer to copy-editors as “subs” and the chief copy-editor as the “slot.” This term referred to the position the slot occupied, at the inside front of a horseshoe shaped table, with subs arrayed around the “rim.”

The copy desk was the point of contact with the mechanical department of the newspaper. The slot funneled copy to the foreman, who ran the print shop, and whose job it was to make everything (including the ads) fit, to “design” the pages, and to oversee the compositors and pressmen who actually “manufactured” the newspaper. By the time Bleyer composed his catalog, the foreman’s job had been divided into three parts, but still included supervision of page makeup. Subsequently, the foreman yielded this function to an editorial occupation in charge of design.

So editorial work developed mostly by aborescence, as a single occupation split, then split again and again. But a second kind of change took place. This was in the transition from the industrial to the professional newspaper, when the organization of the newsroom (and the organization of news) shifted from a mechanical one to a topical one. The channels through which matter flowed ceased to define the matter, which was instead refigured according to topic and arranged in the pages of the paper as a social map.
The Appearance of the Reporter

The development of newsgathering occupations followed a similar trajectory. Initially, the printer gathered news through clipping, occasional correspondence, and even rarer face-to-face contact. Then this precise array of newsgathering practices was shuffled to the editor. Increasingly in the age of the publisher’s paper, editor’s shuffled newsgathering off to more specialized employees, whose increasingly routinized work they oversaw in an increasingly managerial manner.

Newspapers in the US began to refer to “reporters” in the 1830s, but clearly paid writers for news before then. These earlier newsworkers, and most of the newspaper writers of the mid nineteenth century, were referred to as “correspondents.” Correspondents on most newspapers in the age of the editor’s and publisher’s newspaper were (mostly) amateur writers, about whom more in a minute. The “reporters” referred to in the 1830s were something else, salaried or piece-work employees who turned in scavenged accounts from the police courts and other such information-producing institutions. Mid-nineteenth-century commentators clearly distinguished the reporter from the correspondent. Correspondents wrote long informed letters from distant places; they included an authorial voice, and were expected to opine. Routinely, correspondents were pseudonymous, but often they were well-known and only partially disguised personages. Many local newspapers used letters from their Congressional representatives as correspondence from Washington, for instance. So the correspondent was a “manly” commentator on important affairs. Part of the correspondent’s value as a remote observer was the authority conveyed by his (rarely her) persona.

The reporter’s persona, by contrast, was effaced. A reporter, properly speaking, was a mere stenographer; the journalistic term reflects the continuing usage in law, where a reporter records
proceedings. “Reporter” was and is a common name for collections of courtroom transcripts and rulings. In mid-century usage, reporters covered local news, concentrating on the police courts, theaters, City Hall, and other regular venues. Eventually, in the industrial newspaper, these venues would become beats.

As the editor’s paper became the industrial paper, the categories of correspondent and reporter began to blur. Reporters acquired some of the privilege and prestige of the correspondent, along with something of an authorial voice, and the designation “correspondent” came to refer to newsgathering in addition to letter-writing and commentary. In Charles Dana’s (1897) 1893 lecture, “The Profession of Journalism,” reporters are described as the great majority of the paid newsgatherers at a newspaper: of the 100 or so employed as “writers, correspondents, or reporters,” sixty or seventy will be reporters: “men [sic] who are sent out when any event of great interest occurs, when a bank breaks, when a great fire breaks out, when there is an earthquake, to inquire into the facts and collect information.” (P. 53) Such reporters were hardly passive stenographers covering police courts and political meetings. But yet they were not observers with a voice and a face, and Dana stressed that their key virtue was accuracy—the ability to state facts “exactly as they are,” (54), not to interpret them. The correspondent in the industrial paper had become an “employee” of the newspaper, but not as strictly as the reporter. Correspondents worked under the direction of the exchange editor, in Dana’s 1893 account, or of the telegraph editor, in Bleyer’s 1913 catalog, rather than under a figure like the city editor, always understood to be the maestro of the newsroom. Correspondents often had another position and source of income, and often wrote for more than one publication. But, other than the prestigious Washington corps, who were the predecessors of the famous capitol based syndicated columnists of the mid-twentieth century, post-Civil War correspondents were increasingly voiceless and faceless. On elite papers, correspondents would eventually become
Practitioners and critics alike noted that the rise of the telegraph and the wire service had fundamentally altered the flow of news through the newspaper. Horace Greeley, in 1846, predicted that the telegraph would take over newsgathering, outsourcing it from the paper, and allowing the paper to devote its energies instead to the philosophical work of making sense of the news. (Greeley, 1845) Within a short time, the consensus was the opposite. The telegraph, and allied developments in local reporting, had turned the newspaper into an ever more ephemeral miscellany of bizarre events. Charles Dudley Warner, in an 1881 lecture, argued that both telegraph operators and reporters had a bias toward volume--being paid by the piece, they wanted to produce as much as possible--and toward the sensational. “Our newspapers every day are loaded with accidents, casualties, and crime concerning people of whom we never heard before and never shall hear again, the reading of which is of no earthly use to any human being.” (P. 31) Warner urged what Greeley had predicted--that the newspaper devote itself to making sense of the world, and “cease to be a sort of waste-basket at the end of a telegraph wire, into which any reporter, telegraph operator, or gossip-monger can dump whatever he pleases.” (P. 36) The industrial newspaper, focused as it was on the ever more routinized production of news, did not take on the task of interpreting it, and the editors who managed reporters discouraged them from doing so.

The editorial regime of the industrial newspaper, housed in the monumental buildings that newspapers had begun to construct in the late nineteenth century, introduced industrial disciplines into the newsroom, aimed at a more routinized production of reports. (Wilson, 1985) Reporters were housed in large rooms, sharing table space, and under the visual supervision of the city editor and his (rarely her) subordinates. In these newsrooms, reporters were in constant
conflict with editors and especially copy editors, who could cut their income (they were paid by the line) by cutting their copy. Although they recognized their position as oppressive, reporters found it difficult to overcome the market forces that played in the newsroom. (Smythe, 1980) Because of an absence of barriers to entry, the supply of reporters could always outrun the demand. Because of the injunction against voice and persona, reporters were unable to increase their value by branding themselves. And, because of their tradition of independence, reporters were unlikely to form unions. The route they took out of this impasse was professionalization. Professionalization emerged from the confluence of several different agendas. One was the public recognition that the press had become a big business, capable of abusive manipulation like all other big businesses. Reporters were accidental beneficiaries of muckraking campaigns against corruption in the news media by writers like Upton Sinclair (1919) and Will Irwin (1916). The public anxiety over the control of news intersected with the ambitions of reporters to achieve a voice and persona as well as higher pay and more autonomy. A settlement was brokered, in which publishers, to fend off reform movements, allowed editors and reporters more independence, albeit disciplined by objectivity. This settlement interacted with the rise of schools of journalism at the beginning of the twentieth century, a development that came partly from a public interest in improving the quality of journalism and an industry interest in improving the image of the news business. Professionalization, and the rise of the professional paper, coincided with the erection of a wall of separation between news and advertising, and with the diminution of overt partisanism in the news columns. It also coincided with the formation of industry wide organizations (like ASNE) and the writing of canons of ethics. The thinking behind this professional reorganization was fully articulated in the years between the publication of Lippmann’s Public Opinion (1922) and of the report of the Hutchins Commission, A Free and Responsible Press (Leigh, 1947).
The professionalization of reporting coincided with a modernization of the categories of the newspaper. Previously divided according to means of transmission, the matter of the newspaper became divided according to “department,” or topic. By WWI, a number of discrete “pages” had begun to appear—e.g., sports. Over the next decade or two, these grew into sections. The logic of the sections seems clear to a modern reader, so much so that previous divisions seem irrational. In fact, the logic of sections usually involves segmenting readers according to advertiser interest. The business page, for instance, became the repository for real estate and automobile ads, while the “women’s” page housed grocery store ads.

The role of reporting shifted again in response to the rise of visual means of reporting. Daily newspapers resisted illustration until the 1890s, for the most part, leaving that form of reporting to a specialized illustrated press, dominated by national publications like Harper’s Weekly and Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper. A persisting myth says that the explanation for the delayed adoption of illustration is technological—newspapers awaited the development of the half-tone. Instead, they seemed satisfied with the complex verbal arsenal of visual description techniques that reporters had adopted over the years. Gradually, dailies adopted illustration—first sketches and engravings, later photographs. In the 1890s it became common for dailies to include a front-page cartoon, with heavy didactic force, a la Thomas Nast.

This regime of visual journalism invited the presence of artists into the newspaper organization. Bleyer’s catalog has artists, cartoonists, and photographers as an afterthought. As newspapers professionalized, however, these occupations became more common, and as modern design principles were introduced, the role of visual communication became more pronounced.

Photographs became strikingly more common after the development of light-weight cameras in the 1920s. At this time, the profession of news photographer or photojournalist appeared. The first use of the term “photojournalism” in the New York Times dates from 1940,
and appears in an article on cameras, not on news. (“Notes of Camera World, Jan 28, 1940, XX6)

A division of labor appeared between text and picture, with the picture performing much of
the work of immediacy and the text providing explanation, context, and depiction. This division
of labor complemented the modernist shift in journalism, as reporters professionalized and
claimed expertise. As the camera allowed you to see it, and then, with broadcast pictures, to see
it now, the journalist’s function became to explain the long-term implications of events. By the
time television became a major news medium, printed textual reports had shifted into the future
tense; the best reporters told you not what happened but what conventional wisdom holds will
happen.

At the same time, the newsroom became increasingly less masculine. Women had always
worked at newspapers, but usually in ghettos. In industrial newspapers, women edited society
pages, wrote entertainment and travel articles, and did high-profile but highly personal
investigative exposes (Kroeger, 1994), but rarely set editorial policy or headed news bureaus or
worked as Washington or European correspondents. The segregation of women tended to
correspond to the distinction between hard and soft news. Even the women who did the hardest
news reporting--Ida Tarbell, who exposed the Standard Oil trust, and Ida B. Wells Barnett, who
wrote and spoke on lynching--had entered the world of journalism through the “soft” back door--
in both of their cases, religious periodicals. Women’s segregation, never airtight, leaked more
and more in the mid-twentieth century, until the ubiquity of women in the news became true to
the extent that some scholars sensed it becoming a “pink collar ghetto” by the 1970s.

The acceptance of women was partly deceptive in terms of the culture of the newsroom.
While women increasingly occupied important positions as editors and reporters, they also found
that the terrain of news remained differentially gendered, with the most important stuff--national
and international politics, for instance--still coded male. Women in these areas had to assimilate
to traditionally male attitudes and practices.

Professionalism has always been a dicey enterprise for journalists. They lack the “science”
that the grand professions, like medicine, use to justify their autonomy and independence, as well
as the concrete barriers they erect to control entry into the profession--licensing and schooling,
for instance. In the absence of “journalism science,” journalists tend to assimilate to whatever
professional expertise lurks nearby. Crime reporters necessarily adopt the professional attitudes
of police and lawyers. Business reporters adopt the outlook of managers and economists.
Political reporters learn to think like pollsters. Second-hand authority works in place of the real
item. But this is an unstable situation.

Recent Developments

Dan Hallin (1994) has referred to the last generation of news culture as the “high
modernism” of news. In this period, a rationale of objectivity and expertise predicted that
authoritative news media could provide a reliable map of the world for readers across a political
spectrum. Clearly this high modernism depended in part on the coincidence of monopolies in the
news business--local newspapers were “natural monopolies,” three broadcast networks enjoyed a
regulated oligopoly, and national and international wire services were also oligopolistic. Unlike
most western countries, the US did not enjoy truly national media deploying political positions in
a competitive fashion, partly because of the absence of a single national capital.

Other factors supported this high modernism. One key factor was geopolitical. The US
experienced a profound ideological homogenization through the deployment of the Cold War
frame throughout international reporting. Another factor was a stable newsroom division of
labor.

Economics and technology have facilitated an end to this high modernism in US news culture. The traditional monopolies enjoyed by local newspapers have eroded, as alternative suppliers of sports and financial information and classified advertising have appeared. The Associated Press holds a stronger position than ever in news transmission, but the television networks have lost market share, and their news audiences are declining and aging. The introduction of internet technology, with promises of unlimited newshole and redefined local marketplaces, threatens the infrastructure of the high modern moment. And the new tools of the newsroom promise a redefinition of occupational categories. The telephone, the typewriter, and the portable camera did much to cement the division of labor into copy-editors, re-write “men,” and photojournalists. On smaller newspapers, every reporter is expected to do all of these tasks, writing and rewriting prose, taking pictures, and in some cases designing pages, as the computer becomes the necessary gateway for every other newsroom technology.

Journalists and editors greet this changed environment with the skepticism and anxiety that they have historically exhibited toward change in their own workplace. Although journalism is supposed to be dedicated to novelty, journalists in the US have always done whatever is in their power to embargo novelty from their work lives, resisting pictures, design innovations, and unions with psychotic gusto. But perhaps today the sky is really falling. In tandem with corporate control of news media, cost-cutting efficiencies have sped up newswork even while eliminating many of the pools of institutional memory that gave news its intelligence, or at least its wherewithall to withstand the narratives constructed by and for the powerful. Beats have disappeared at all but the biggest newspapers, taking with them the deep knowledge that allowed reporters to present themselves as experts, along with the ties to the institutions covered that turned beat reporters into informal public relations personnel.
In the most recent set of developments, the corporate convergence of ownership of different types of media is producing attempts to create synergies among different units. One particularly well reported case involves the Tampa Tribune, whose parent also owns a Fox television affiliate and runs a web news page. In its new building, this organization exists as a curious panopticon, with three floors of workspace surrounding a central atrium. Each floor is dedicated to a different unit, but they are all supervisable by key management personnel at the bottom.

Between the units, occupational categories are becoming fluid, as reporters are supposed to write for the paper, log for the web, and appear on television. It is stipulated that there should be movement between the units, and those most mobile--the telegenic among the print reporters, the literate among the television editors--will rise in the organization.

Reporters there and elsewhere view these arrangements with amusement and sometimes alarm. The traditions of newswork find such innovations fey and perhaps dangerous, ignoring as they do the supports for repertorial autonomy built into the modern newsroom. Leave it to Fox. But history shows that the seemingly scientific division of tasks and responsibilities has always been contingent, and will always continue to change.


Galveston Typographical Union. Galveston (Texas) Typographical Union Records, 1860-1932; Office of the Secretary Treasurer, Minutes of Monthly Meetings, 1875-1889. Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.


