

Lecture II

The Newspaper as Party Organ

1790 to 1840

The close connection between the formation of American political parties in the 1790s and the growth of the newspaper is quite clear. The idea of the newspaper as the objective deliverer of the day's happenings came about only in the 1840s and 1850s. Before that, the newspaper relied heavily on political patronage to bring in business, and, in the 1790s and again from 1828 to 1840 or so, the most popular newspapers in the country had a pronounced partisan bent.

The advent of party politics in the 1790s, with the formerly united revolutionary generation fracturing into the contending factions known as Federalists and Republicans (or Democratic Republicans), the newspaper became an important instrument for arousing public support and enunciating the party line, whether that of the government or the opposition. The impetus to establish a newspaper that would support national government policies has been attributed to Alexander Hamilton. According to newspaper historian John Tebbel, during the war for independence Hamilton came to appreciate the power of the press as he traveled around the colonies with Washington's army. As Secretary of the Treasury in Washington's first administration he "understood . . . that the best way to be certain of a newspaper's dedication was to hand-pick its editor and control it yourself, and that is why in 1789 he established what was in reality the official organ of the Federalist administration, the *Gazette of the United States*." (Tebbel, p. 58)

Hamilton picked John Fenno, a New York printer with Federalist leanings to be the editor of the new paper and brought him to Philadelphia. Hamilton himself used some of his personal wealth to help start the paper and gathered funds from other wealthy backers of the Administration to subsidize the new, very modest publication. Like most of the newspapers of the time, it was three columns wide and contained four pages of articles and government announcements, the latter funneled to the paper by Hamilton, amounting to a form of subsidy. Starting on a twice per week schedule, the paper became a daily in 1791. It was never a commercial success and Fenno himself engaged in constant battles with political opponents, finally dying in the yellow fever epidemic that struck Philadelphia in 1798. In its early years the paper did not accept advertising, which Fenno believed would have left him beholden to commercial interests, but eventually commercial necessity overcame principled objectivity. Hamilton, using a pseudonym, wrote some articles for the paper himself and made sure that nothing appeared in it that could put the Washington government in a bad light.

In 1790 there were some one hundred newspapers in the new United States, published in most cases weekly or bi-weekly. Most of the newspapers followed a Federalist line at the outset of the decade, but soon Thomas Jefferson and James Madison realized they had to counter Federalist "propaganda" with their own party press and, by the end of the decade, some three-fifths of the newspapers in the country supported the Republican cause. The process of building a Republican-leaning press began in 1791 when Jefferson recruited the poet and New York newspaper editor Philip Freneau to edit the *National Gazette*, aimed at countering Hamilton's influence and attacking the Washington government's plans for a national bank and other "dangerous" innovations. When the capital of the country moved to Philadelphia from New York, both of the rival newspapers followed. Fenno made no secret of his partisanship, but for years Freneau continued to declare that he was independent of the Jefferson/Madison party. But historians have uncovered incontrovertible evidence that his paper owed its birth and continued existence to Jefferson's patronage, which included a sinecure for Freneau at the Department of State where Jefferson served as Secretary in the first Washington administration.

A yellow fever epidemic that struck Philadelphia in 1793 forced the closure of the *Gazette* and Freneau fled the city to save himself from the plague. The Republicans now had to rely on the anti-Administration broadsides issuing from Benjamin Franklin Bache's *General Advertiser*. Bache, the grandson of the great Benjamin Franklin, was an unbridled polemicist, far worse than Freneau or even Fenno. He changed the name of his paper to the *Aurora* in 1794, under which title it carried on an unremitting campaign against President Washington himself as well as other leading Federalists.

In September 1796, Washington issued his famous Farewell Address by releasing it first to a favored Federalist newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser*, a somewhat less polemical journal than John Fenno's *Gazette of the United States*. Washington invited the *Daily Advertiser's* editor, David Claypoole, to the presidential residence to inform him of the honor he was about to confer upon his newspaper. When the Address appeared – and was rapidly reprinted in many other newspapers – Bache responded in the *Aurora* that,

If ever a nation was debauched by a man, the American nation has been debauched by Washington. If ever a nation has suffered from the improper influence of a man, the American nation has suffered from the influence of Washington. If ever a nation was deceived by a man, the American nation has been deceived by Washington. Let his conduct then be an example to future age. Let it serve to be a warning that no man may be an idol. (quoted in Tebbel, p. 66)

The unrepentant Bache saluted Washington's departure from Philadelphia the next year with yet another broadside, declaring that "every heart . . . ought to beat high with exultation that the name of Washington from this day ceases to give a currency to political iniquity, and to legalized corruption." (Tebbel, p. 66). Bache died in another Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic in 1798 at the age of 27. It is not reported what Washington's reaction to the news was.

But before his untimely death, Bache relentlessly attacked the next (and last) Federalist president, John Adams. The fanatical editor was undeterred by threats of violence from Federalist-backed mobs. Bache himself was attacked and beaten and his printing shop wrecked, but he continued his campaign against Adams nonetheless. After Bache's death, the *Aurora's* editor became an equally fanatical Irish immigrant named William Duane, who married Bache's widow. Adams and the Federalist majority in Congress responded to this invective, much of it the work of recent immigrants, by passing the Alien and Sedition Acts, which, among other things, criminalized the printing of "false statements" critical of the federal government or its officials. A number of anti-Federalist newspaper editors were prosecuted under the laws, but, in most cases, the defendants were found innocent or received light sentences. The Sedition Law expired two years after passage and the Jefferson Administration obviously did not renew it.

One of the most avid supporters of the Federalists was another recent European immigrant, William Cobbett, who escaped from Britain where he was wanted for exposing graft among officers of the British Army. Upon arrival in the U.S. in 1792, he immediately started to agitate against the pro-French Republicans. Despite his having been chased from Britain by the authorities there, he adopted a strong pro-British stance in the ongoing conflict with the French and succeeded in establishing a short-lived and highly contentious little newspaper called *Porcupine's Gazette* (1797-1799). He led the attack on Bache and then Duane. He finally had to flee Philadelphia for New York when he attacked local notable Dr. Benjamin Rush for his treatment of yellow fever by bleeding, which Cobbett contended (correctly) was worse than worthless. Rush sued him for libel and won a \$5,000 judgment, plus court costs. Cobbett returned to Britain to avoid payment where he was hailed as a great defender of Britain's cause against the French and their American sympathizers. He continued his long career of agitation through the press and via various pamphlets decrying corruption and the treatment of the poor in Britain. He ended his career and life as a member of Parliament after the passage of the Reform Act of 1832, which he had fought for in the late 1820s and early 1830s.

A more respectable journalist was the famous lexicographer Noah Webster. In New York, he edited a newspaper called the *American Minerva* starting in 1793 and made no secret of his paper's editorial policy, which was for "vindicating and supporting the policy of President Washington." Webster pioneered the idea of the "editorial page," writing editorials supporting the Administration and castigating Washington's Republican opponents. But the contentious atmosphere surrounding national politics became too toxic for such a polite and erudite man and he eventually withdrew from active participation in the paper and sold it outright in 1803, by which time it had changed its name to the *Commercial Advertiser*, which it would remain until it demise in 1904.

Jefferson's election in 1800 was followed by a gradual cooling of the press wars. Jefferson recruited a well-read and moderate Philadelphia editor, Samuel Harrison Smith, to come to Washington and start an administration-supporting newspaper. The *National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser*, as it was called, actually printed a somewhat objective take on the news of the day and went on to become a daily in 1813 and continued in existence until after the Civil War. Jefferson was a famous defender of the freedom of the press, even if it meant he had to tolerate unprincipled attacks from politically motivated editors.

Before his fatal encounter with Aaron Burr in 1804, Alexander Hamilton also continued his close association with the press, but this time in New York, where he participated in the founding of the *New York Evening Post* in 1801. Hamilton wrote a series of eighteen articles for the *Post* in response to Jefferson's inaugural address, which, among other things, decried the new president's declared intention to essentially dismantle the American army and navy. Hamilton signed his articles "Lucius Crassus" in keeping with the established practice of using as pseudonyms the names of noble Romans from the Republican era. The *Post* would go on to be the longest-lived daily newspaper in the country's history. It began as a moderately critical Federalist voice, although its editor, William Coleman, penned a ringing declaration of high principle in the paper's first issue, declaring its political neutrality. It also has the distinction of being the first American newspaper to print reviews of stage plays and art exhibits.

Perhaps the most famous, or infamous, example of scandalous journalism during Jefferson's first administration was the campaign mounted by James Callender, another recent immigrant to the United States, this time from Scotland. Callender had started his Philadelphia newspaper career as an avid supporter of the Republicans and, in 1797, broke the story of Alexander Hamilton's adulterous affair with Maria Reynolds in a pamphlet he had printed in the city. After Jefferson's election as president, Callender petitioned the new chief executive for the position of postmaster in Richmond. When refused, he turned on Jefferson, writing in a small Richmond newspaper about reports that the president had fathered several children with one of his slaves named "Sally." Callender drowned in 1803 after falling in the James River, apparently while drunk.

By the early 1800's the press had less impact on politics, since the Republicans so dominated the national scene that Federalist sympathizers had ceased to have any realistic chance of retaking power in Washington. Eventually, a two-party system would re-emerge in the mid-1820's with the election of John Quincy Adams as president in 1824 in a contest disputed bitterly by Andrew Jackson and his supporters after Adams was awarded the presidency by the House of Representatives. All four candidates in the 1824 race had served in Republican administrations, so the breakdown really amounted to a split in that party, not a return of the Federalists to power.

"By 1828, there were more newspapers and newspaper readers in America than anywhere else in the world." (Tebbel, p. 75) Tebbel writes (p. 80) that by 1820 "there were 512 newspapers being published in the United States . . . , twenty-four of which were dailies, sixty-six semi- or tri-weeklies and 422 weeklies." And, "beyond the cities, the spread of newspapers was even greater, increasing sixfold in the

first two decades of the century.” This fact helps account for the wave of support for Andrew Jackson in the 1828 presidential election. Starting in 1827, the Jackson forces tried to recruit journalists in each state, from New England to the Mississippi. Where a pro-Jackson newspaper did not exist, the candidate’s supporters collected money and established one. “In North Carolina alone, nine new Jackson papers had appeared by the middle of 1827, while in Ohio, eighteen new papers supplemented the five already in existence in 1824.” (Wilentz, p. 303). Not to be outdone, the backers of incumbent president John Quincy Adams sought to influence public opinion through the press led by two Washington newspapers: the *National Intelligenser* and the *National Journal*. The anti-Jackson press was also notable for its mudslinging stories, similar to those penned by partisans during the 1790s.

After his overwhelming victory in 1828, Jackson turned to journalists to staff his new administration, often in positions of considerable power. Responding to criticism from his political opponents, who disapproved of journalists’ influence, Jackson declared “why should this class of citizens be excluded from offices to which others, not more patriotic, nor presenting stronger claims as to qualification may aspire?” (Schlesinger, p. 67). In fact, two of Jackson’s most important supporters and then advisors after his election were newspapermen : Amos Kendall and Francis C. Blair. These two men, peculiar individuals who paired great intelligence with rather weird eccentricities, formed part of Jackson’s “kitchen cabinet” during his first term as president. Before the election they had edited a Frankfort, Kentucky-based newspaper called the *Argus of Western America*. As such, they exemplified a practice that would be important in many later presidential administrations: the important role of media personalities in forming public opinion and executing policy.

Jackson recognized the usefulness of newspaper support and invited Blair, who had become managing editor of the *Argus* after Kendall left to join the Jackson administration, to come to Washington and helped him establish a new Administration-friendly daily, the *Washington Globe*. Tebbel points out that “the *Globe* was assured of success because Jackson was able to maneuver Congressional and Department printing into its shop, and this alone was worth \$50,000 per year.” (p. 87) Like the Federalist’s *Gazette of the United States* in the early 1790s, the *Globe* carried the “party line” and all loyal Jackson supporters were expected to subscribe to it, ensuring its viability. With the defeat of Adams, Jackson’s most bitter opponent turned out to be his own vice president, John C. Calhoun. Calhoun had brought his own “press spokesman” to Washington in the mid-1820’s, a man named Duff Green, and arranged for his newspaper, the *Washington Telegraph*, to receive a printing contract from the Senate. But once Jackson and Calhoun had their falling out in the early 1830s, Jackson made sure that the *Telegraph* lost the government printing contract and most of its subscribers. The *Telegraph* soon went out of business.

Blair and his partner John Cook Rives managed the *Globe* throughout the two Jackson administrations, but they failed to excite the interest of Jackson’s successor, Martin Van Buren, and the failing newspaper was taken over by a Richmond editor and ceased to be a major force in the capital. Starting in 1833, when the *Globe* was at the height of its influence, Blair and Rives decided to publish as a sideline a comprehensive record of congressional debates. Their shorthand experts took down the debates in the two houses of congress, and while their newspaper lost most of its clout after Jackson’s retirement, their “sideline,” the *Congressional Globe*, became the closest thing to an official record of congressional debates in the country and proved to be quite profitable. It remains the “go to” reference source for historians researching the speeches of Webster, Calhoun, Clay and other congressional stars. The *Congressional Globe*, while not a newspaper itself, provided the newspapers that would develop in the 1840s and 1850s a reliable source of verbatim quotations until the establishment of today’s *Congressional Record* in 1873, which is printed by the Government Printing Office and, of course, relies today on audio recordings of speeches, as well as texts submitted for publication by members who did not actually get up and speak.

Abolitionist Newspapers

William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator* published in Boston from 1831 to 1866 was a weekly with a circulation of about 3,000, most of the subscribers being free African-Americans. It was the foremost abolitionist organ and had influence far beyond its small readership. The anti-slavery campaign launched by Garrison was similar to that of the British abolitionist William Wilberforce, like Garrison, an ardent Christian reformer. To Garrison, slavery was, above all, a moral issue, with enslavement of others being a profoundly un-Christian practice in his view.

Garrison was a masterful printer (among other talents) and supposedly composed his ringing editorials denouncing slavery directly into his composing stick, thus expediting the printing process. In other words, he did not write down what he was planning to print, he set it directly in type. The newspaper advertised "lodgings for colored people" and other products and services needed by the Free Black community of New England, a small, but highly motivated group.

The formerly enslaved Frederick Douglass had been stirring audiences for many months with his personal story of enslavement and his escape to freedom in the North when he met Garrison for the first time in August 1841. Douglass, who would go on to publish his own abolitionist newspaper, *The North Star*, soon became one of the most rousing anti-slavery speakers in the country. He had an amazingly strong voice and an electrifying presence. His autobiography, which he penned and issued three times during his life, was one of the first "best sellers" by an African-American author. Garrison and other white leaders of the American Anti-Slavery Society valued highly Douglass as a speaker, but were opposed to his desire to start his own anti-slavery newspaper. As Douglass's biographer noted:

The Liberator had never been self-sustaining; it already depended on funds raised by . . . annual bazaars as well as on black subscribers. A rival paper, with Douglass as editor, might pose a real threat. (McFeely, p. 147).

Undeterred, with the help of money raised in Great Britain during a speaking tour there, Douglass launched *The North Star* on December 3, 1847. The paper came out every week until April 17, 1851, but like the *Liberator*, it was dependent on the patronage of wealthy anti-slavery figures. Once these funds dried up, the newspaper ceased publication. *The North Star* was only one of three or four Black-owned newspapers in the country at that time. Douglass continued publishing a successor to *The North Star*, entitled somewhat immodestly *Frederick Douglass's Newspaper*. This weekly continued from June 1851 until December 1855. Unlike Garrison, Douglass was not a printer and relied on a contractor to print and distribute his newspaper. *The Liberator* and *The North Star* provided outlets for the many passionate and eloquent activists in the abolitionist movement, but they also reflected the diverse and conflicting views on how the anti-slavery crusade should be conducted. Garrison championed a moral approach and eschewed any involvement in elective politics. Douglass and others were much more inclined to back the nascent anti-slavery movements like the Liberty Party and the Free Soil Party, and, finally, the Republican Party. Garrison and *The Liberator* finally became convinced advocates of a political approach to slavery abolition and strongly backed Lincoln's Administration and the passage of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery throughout the country.