

### Lecture III

#### Three New York Newspaper Giants: 1830 to 1870

Turning from the political journalism of Washington and the crusading abolitionists of Boston, we come to New York City as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century approaches. In 1850, America's premier metropolis reached a population of 515,000, an increase of 200,000 people since 1840, and it just kept growing. This massive audience included many newspaper readers and the reduction of the price of many of the city's newspapers to a mere one cent put the four-page sheets within their reach. Serving this mass of potential readers led to circulation wars and various gimmicks, but it also encouraged good journalism. Three men took advantage of this situation to found newspapers that would continue well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century: James Gordon Bennett founded the *New York Herald* in 1835, Horace Greeley started the *New York Tribune* in 1841, and Henry J. Raymond established the *New York Times* in 1851. These three pioneering publishers placed their very different personal stamps on the newspapers they founded and opened a new era of journalism in America in which large daily newspapers wielded political influence themselves and ceased to be merely the instruments of political parties or powerful elected officials.

The mass circulation press only became possible due to revolutionary advances in printing technology, such as the steam-powered rotary presses produced by Richard M. Hoe's company starting in 1841. These giant machines made possible the printing of millions of pages per day, the biggest advance in printing since Gutenberg's moveable –type printing presses of the 1450's. Although the major technical advances in creating the steam-powered press are credited to German inventors, the innovations were most readily introduced in the United States, which had more newspaper readers than anywhere else in the world. The printed word, along with a few illustrations, rapidly became the main means of communication in the United States. The invention of the telegraph, also in the 1840's, soon made possible the rapid transmission of news reports throughout the country – although the cost of sending telegrams limited the use of this technology until later in the century. The other major invention that made the modern newspaper possible was the linotype machine, perfected by Ottmar Mergenthaler, a German-American immigrant, and first used at the *New York Tribune* in 1884. Mergenthaler's invention has been called the most important innovation in printing since the Gutenberg press. With the advent of computers, of course, the linotype machine went the way of the steam engine, but for many years it greatly increased the size and scope of the daily newspaper by replacing an army of compositors who had to hand-set type for every word appearing in the newspaper with a few linotype operators sitting at their keyboards creating the printing type that would then be fitted onto the cylinders and attached to the press.

James Gordon Bennett arrived in the United States from Scotland in 1819 at the age of 24. He came from a well-to-do Catholic family, a rarity in very Protestant Scotland, and received a college education in his homeland largely because his father hoped he would enter the priesthood. Bennett, in fact, rejected Catholicism and became more of a follower of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, such as Adam Smith and David Hume. When he chose to emigrate to America, he had no fixed idea about a future career, but he did have a small fund provided by his father and a strong ambition to succeed.

One historian of American journalism drew the following unflattering portrait of Bennett:

*He tended to form his public identity on the basis of negatives, Anglophobia, anti-Catholicism, and anti-abolitionism in particular. He misled his unsophisticated readers with simplistic conspiratorial explanations of events and forces that greatly affected their lives. Many of his contemporaries envied his success but detested the means by which he achieved it. They respected his power, but they hated him. (Crouthamel, p. x)*

Unlike most of the other newspaper publishers we have studied, Bennett was not a printer. He worked briefly as a proofreader at a New York publishing house, but soon found his footing as a reporter and editor. He covered politics in New York and Washington for the *New York Courier* (later the *Courier and Examiner*), the country's largest circulation newspaper in the early 1830s. He found his political home among the Jacksonian Democrats who came to power at that time, but his prickly personality and questionable loyalty (he regularly passed information on to Jackson's enemy Nicholas Biddle, head of the Bank of the United States) kept him from ever becoming the captive of a particular political party. He wanted, more than anything else to be the owner and publisher of a successful daily newspaper and in that he succeeded beyond his wildest dreams.

As the technical advances in printing made larger and larger press runs possible, the New York newspapers sought to multiply their circulation figures by lowering the price per copy. The 1830s saw the advent of the "penny press," with first in 1833 the *New York Sun* and then the *Herald* (after 1835) selling for that low price. The so-called "mercantile press," which concentrated on news of interest to the city's thriving business community, sold generally for six cents per copy. But the *Herald* aimed to reach a different demographic, although it sought to include as much of the business news as it could. Bennett favored scandalous and sensational stories of crimes and accidents as circulation builders, while he penned editorials with a populist bent and a strident nationalism. Crouthamel notes, "Bennett fed his readers a steady diet of violence, crime, murder, suicide, seduction, and rape both in the news reporting and in gossip." (p. 25)

In his biography of Lincoln, David S. Reynolds cites newspaper fomented sensations as a new fact of life in America:

*Popular culture exploded during that decade [the 1830's]. Mass newspapers dropped dramatically in price, purveying news filled with crowd-pleasing sensational stories about crimes, sex scandals, duels, and the like. Emerson generalized that Americans were 'reading all day murders & accidents in the newspapers,' and Thoreau spoke of the 'startling and monstrous events as fill the daily papers.' When real life sensations weren't available, editors made them up, as in the famous Moon Hoax, a hugely popular newspaper story of 1835, widely accepted as true, about a powerful telescope that revealed a society on the moon with purple unicorns, brown man bats, and golden palaces. (Reynolds, Abe, p. 149)*

Although the *Herald* and other penny newspapers had subscribers, their main form of circulation was on the street by newsboys at corner newsstands or hawking the latest edition, hollering out "Extra! Extra! Read all about it!" The boys would line up every morning (or afternoon) and buy a bundle of newspapers at a small discount and then seek out customers along the city's teeming streets. Until a successful two-week strike in 1899, they could not turn back unsold newspapers for credit, so they had a great incentive to sell as many as possible. The *Herald* quickly became profitable and remained so for the rest of the century.

The second "revolutionary" publisher of this era was the eccentric Horace Greeley, whose *New York Tribune* hit the streets in 1841. Like the *Herald*, it sold for one cent, but unlike the *Herald*, it aspired to be a "family" daily, one that country people living far from the flesh pots of New York City could comfortably turn to for news and enlightenment. Greeley, a bit of a country bumpkin himself, turned out both a daily paper, read mainly in the city, and a weekly edition that arrived throughout the East via the U.S. Mail. Although never as popular as Bennett's *Herald* among city dwellers, the *Tribune* came to have a major impact on American history through its staunch anti-slavery position during the 1840s and 1850s. The *Herald*, on the other hand, maintained a pro-Southern position on the slavery question, perhaps due to Bennett's early experience as an editor at the Charleston, South Carolina *Courier* during the 1820s. His dislike of Blacks certainly influenced his views on the subject of slavery and in this regard he did not differ from most of the *Herald's* readership. New York City continued to be a bastion of

Northern racism, both among the large immigrant population and among the city's businessmen, many of whom depended on the cotton business for their livelihoods.

While at the *Courier* in Charleston, Bennett saw how the paper's editor dispatched boats to meet incoming ships from the West Indies and Europe in order to get the latest news from these places before other newspapers, news that could be of value to traders seeking to win a step on their competition. Once established, the *Herald* became famous for its ability to get the latest news through similar methods. Bennett even paid dispatch riders to bring the text of presidential messages and other speeches by express to New York from Washington so that his paper could "scoop" the competition with the full text of these speeches. Bennett rightly saw that while some of his readers wanted blood and gore, others were more interested in politics and business. He sought to satisfy both demands in his newspaper.

Historians differ on the size of the readership for the *Herald* as opposed to the *Tribune*, but by the 1850's they were incontestably the two largest circulation daily papers in the nation. Crouthamel in his biography of Bennett notes that "circulation claims were notoriously unreliable" but that the *Herald* probably had a daily circulation of about 60,000 in 1860. The *Tribune* is estimated to have had a daily circulation of 45,000 in 1860, but its weekly edition "probably reached 217,000 subscribers by the Civil War" making it "by all accounts . . . the most widely read newspaper in the world." (Williams, p. 166). The two major New York dailies also differed in terms of their influence on the public. Tebbel notes that "In spite of the *Herald's* success . . . it was never an influential paper." Bennett's often ranting editorials did not change many minds, while Greeley's ruminations had a profound impact on public opinion both before and during the Civil War. Thus, although a "popular" newspaper, the *Herald* did not carry the weight of the *Tribune*. Tebbel concludes that "The *Herald's* readers were highly entertained by Bennett, and no doubt many of them appreciated the range of news to be found in the paper, but they often voted contrary to Bennett's specific instructions." (p. 103)

Abraham Lincoln knew and appreciated the influence of Greeley and the *Tribune*. He sought to get the editor on his side on the question of emancipating the enslaved people of the South, which Lincoln wanted to do as much as Greeley, but felt constrained to do only if it would strengthen the Union's military position. Responding to an "open letter" to him published by Greeley on August 19, 1862, calling upon him to issue a proclamation freeing all of the slaves, Lincoln wrote that if he could save the Union "without freeing any slave" or "freeing all of the slaves", or "freeing some and leaving others alone," he would do so. Since the outset of the fighting in 1861, Lincoln had recognized the importance of having Greeley and the *Tribune* on his side and had given instructions to his staff to provide information to *Tribune* reporters that would be helpful to the Union effort. In a letter to former Mississippi senator Robert John Walker – one of the few strong Unionists from the Deep South – Lincoln stated that he had the "utmost confidence in Mr. Greeley" and recognized the importance of "having him firmly behind me" since he would "be as helpful to me as an army of one hundred thousand men." (Williams, p. 226)

Bennett may have actually had a greater impact on the history of journalism than Greeley. For instance, he was instrumental in the formation of the Associated Press, an organization that brought together a number of New York newspapers to establish a news-gathering organization that would be commonly funded to provide spot news reports to its members. The main incentive was to share the cost of telegraphic reports from the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), the first war to be reported upon by telegraph. The *Tribune* and the *New York Times* soon joined the association and eventually it grew to be a nationwide and then worldwide newsgathering organization (it currently has about 1,300 members in print and electronic media). As the cost of telegrams was reduced by technological innovation (and some competition), the timeliness of news reports greatly increased.

From the outset in 1841, the *Tribune* sought out and published the works of aspiring writers and poets: Emerson, and Thoreau – most notably – got their start writing for the paper. Greeley used his New York connections to get these struggling writers their first book publishing contracts. He also hired feminist and literary critic Margaret Fuller to be a contributor to the paper and, when she moved to Paris, to serve as the *Tribune's* “Paris correspondent.” In fact, Bennett and Greeley pioneered the use of “foreign correspondents.” Both Greeley and his managing editor, Charles A. Dana, were highly interested in international affairs, particularly the republican uprisings seeking to overthrow European monarchies during the 1848 revolutions there. The *Tribune* hired none other than Karl Marx as its London correspondent and he sent the paper some five hundred articles during the 1850s up to 1862 when Greeley objected to his socialist leanings and fired both Marx and Dana. Dana would return to journalism after the Civil War and have a highly successful career as editor of the *New York Sun*.

### Henry J. Raymond and the *New York Times*

Unlike Bennett and Greeley, Henry J. Raymond was not a vivid personality. He learned the newspaper trade working at Greeley's *Tribune*, but, like so many aspiring journalists, he really wanted his own newspaper. With financial backing from a wealthy currency trader named George Jones and a few other investors, Raymond established the *New York Times* in 1851, declaring that his paper would be a model of objectivity and accuracy in reporting. He sensed a desire on the part of New York's educated elite for a newspaper that avoided the sensationalism of Bennett's *Herald*, and the often flakey idealism of Greeley's *Tribune*. In his quest for objectivity, however, Raymond and the *Times* ran the risk of failing to help its readers clearly understand what was at stake. *Times* reporter Elmer Davis writing a history of the paper from 1851 to 1921 signaled this dilemma:

*In his views on public questions Raymond was if anything too well-balanced. He often lamented a habit of mind which inclined him to see both sides of any dispute. (Davis, p. 24)*

This tendency did not extend to his life outside of journalism. He was elected to the New York state legislature as a Whig in 1852 and even served as Lieutenant Governor briefly from 1855 to 1856. He has also been called the “founding father of the Republican Party” and served during the Lincoln administration as the party's national chairman. In other words, he helped found and remained a loyal member of the Republican Party, but always sought to be a moderating voice in politics. He firmly rejected the dominant influence in Washington of the Southern slaveholders and resolutely supported Lincoln throughout the Civil War. But he also opposed the Radical Republicans who sought to impose a harsh reconstruction policy on the South.

*The Times* was a successful newspaper from the outset and had a circulation of about 40,000 for its daily paper and 50,000 for its Sunday edition by 1860. Raymond set the tone for the newspaper as a serious, factual and moderate source of information which it has maintained ever since. As Davis put it in his 1921 history of *The Times*: “The character which Raymond gave to *The Times* – excellence in news service, avoidance of fantastic extremes in editorial opinion, and a general sobriety in manner – is the character which *The Times* has retained ever since.” (p. 6)

### Reporting the Civil War

Although most of the major daily newspapers had covered the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), the coverage was nothing compared to the massive reportage on all aspects of the Civil War. In his book, *The Golden Age of the Newspaper*, George H. Douglas writes:

*The newspapers described the battles in full detail, explained and analyzed the implications of the drift of events, published maps, and ran lists of dead and injured. For those not actually involved in the battles themselves, the newspaper evoked the full reality and horror of the War. As Oliver Wendell Holmes put it at the time: "Only bread and newspapers we must have. Everything else we can do without."* (p. 56)

The big New York dailies like the *Herald*, the *Tribune*, the *Times*, and the *Sun* sent dozens of reporters to follow and report on the action. These so-called "specials" were the forerunners of today's war correspondents and some of them suffered death, injury, or imprisonment as spies. Both North and South had their journalists on the scene of the fighting, but a brief perusal of the Charleston *Courier*, for instance, compared with the New York *Herald*, makes it clear that the reading public of the South received a far less accurate picture of the course of the war than newspaper readers in the North. The Confederate government blocked delivery of Northern papers, but enough got through so that at least the educated portion of the Southern public gained a pretty good idea of how the war was going. One exception to the Southern papers overly optimistic reporting was the way they derided Jefferson Davis's leadership while celebrating the efforts of the Confederate troops.

News items from the big New York dailies with reporters covering the front line action were routinely picked up and reprinted by smaller dailies throughout the North. A practice allowed since colonial times. As already noted, Lincoln attributed great influence to the mercurial Horace Greeley, but he also had to contend with a steady drumbeat of criticism and defeatism from Democratic-leaning newspapers and the less-than-supportive James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald*. As Douglas noted: "Bennett caused no end of pain to Lincoln during the war years and regularly assailed the president and his policies in his usually adroit and satiric language." (p. 59) That being said, the *Herald* provided the best coverage of the action, with some forty "specials" on assignment at most times covering every aspect of the fighting. The *Herald's* reports were indispensable reading in Washington, often carrying greater weight than the Union Army's own intelligence reports on the enemy's actions and intentions.

Lincoln moved in a few cases to close-down so-called "copperhead" newspapers – the term used to refer to Northern sympathizers with the Confederate cause. The most notorious case was that of Dayton, Ohio editor and congressman Charles Laird Vallandigham, whose pro-Southern, anti-abolitionist editorials led Union Army General Ambrose E. Burnside to shutter the newspaper. Lincoln later ordered Vallandigham banished to the Confederacy.

One reporter who made his career covering the war was Whitelaw Reid, a reporter for the Cincinnati *Gazette*. His outstanding writing caught the attention of the *Tribune's* Horace Greeley, who hired him as a reporter. Reid eventually became Greeley's successor as the publisher of the *Tribune* in the 1870's. The Reid family eventually took control of the *Tribune* and then the *Herald Tribune* in the 1920s and remained the newspaper's owners until 1958.

War dispatches had to be timely to be of any interest, and this meant brevity in reports that could be quickly sent via telegraph to the paper's headquarters hundreds of miles away. The verbose and ornate writing style common to newspaper reports prior to the War gave way to a new, "telegraphic" writing style. Historians have long relied on these highly readable reports when seeking to reconstruct this earthshaking conflict. The American Civil War was the first war anywhere in the world to be covered in such a complete and timely fashion. Douglas concludes his coverage of this chapter in the history of the American press by writing:

*The Civil War created a kind of nationwide consciousness; a sense of unity and coherency even in the face of political disintegration and the horrors of war. The newspaper, more than any other institution, was responsible for this birth of a national consciousness that remains with us today.* (p. 67)

Of course, this sweeping statement is much truer for those parts of the nation that supported the Union cause than for those joined in the Confederacy.

#### Charles Anderson Dana and the New York *Sun*

No discussion of American newspapers in the years between the end of the Civil War and the rise of the press barons like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst in the 1880s and 1890s would be complete without mention of Charles Dana's New York *Sun*. As previously noted, Dana had been the guiding light of Horace Greeley's *Tribune* throughout the 1850s up to his firing in 1862. He was the first newspaperman to carry the title "managing editor," and his firm grip on the *Tribune* allowed Greeley to engage in much world travel (mainly to Europe) and cultivation of his utopian dreams of an "associationist" society in which people lived and worked in sort of autonomous communes. Dana had no such dreams, but after his dismissal by Greeley, President Lincoln appointed him assistant secretary of the army, a position he held until the end of the war. In 1868, with the help of several wealthy backers, Dana acquired the old New York *Sun*, which had pioneered the "penny press" in the early 1830s, but had fallen on hard times during the Civil War. He quickly displayed his talent for creating a highly readable newspaper that concentrated on "human interest" stories, but avoided the salacious and the sensational. As such, it was a perfect match for the Victorian morality and sentimentality of the so-called Gilded Age. In fact, many articles in Dana's *Sun* could have been mistaken for short stories by O. Henry. As Douglas puts it: "Dana was determined not to have a single story that was not compelling to the reader." Every attempt was made to write articles that grabbed the reader's attention. It was the city editor of the *Sun*, John B. Bogart, who encapsulated what the *Sun* meant by "news.": "When a dog bites a man that is not news. But when a man bites a dog, that's news."

Thus, the *Sun*'s most talented journalists were actually writers. They wrote stories that captured the human angle and created a style of reporting that successful journalists have followed ever since. Today's *Washington Post* is full of stories about individuals seeking baby formula, or fleeing war in Ukraine, or perhaps just enjoying the fine weather. The *Sun* invented – or at least perfected -- the practice of relating big stories – at least in part – by interviewing and writing about the individuals affected. In a practice reminiscent of Greeley's sponsorship of Emerson and Thoreau, the paper also drew on the talents of actual professional writers like Robert Lewis Stevenson, Walt Whitman, Rudyard Kipling and William Dean Howells. But it was above all the human note that made the newspaper a success in a very crowded field of New York dailies. Finally, it was a *Sun* editorial writer, Francis P. Church, who in 1897 penned perhaps the best known newspaper editorial of all time: "Yes Virginia There is a Santa Claus" in answer to a letter from an eight-year old girl who supposedly heard from her father that if "if you see it in the *Sun* it's so." Although the newspaper is long gone, many later newspapers and magazines – such as the *New Yorker* – are indebted to it for perfecting a reporting style that entertains and grips the reader while it conveys accurate information.