

Lecture IV

Press Barons, Syndication, Features, 1870 to 1920

When we speak of the “Golden Age of the Newspaper” we are referring above all to the fifty years from 1870 to 1920. Advances in printing technology – such as the already mentioned linotype – and the vast increase in advertising revenue -- made large daily papers tremendously profitable enterprises, able to build large headquarters buildings which usually included both the editorial offices and, in the basement, the roaring printing presses. Another often overlooked technical advance was the advent of first gas and then incandescent lighting, which made it possible for the average reader to sit down with his “evening paper” and catch up on the day’s events. In the years after the Civil War afternoon newspapers came to surpass morning papers in circulation and by 1900 some three-fourths of all newspapers had their main edition in the afternoon. Many “morning” papers started to print afternoon editions as well to capture the growing evening readership. It wasn’t until the post-World War II era that television news -- and its advertising revenue -- undercut and finally destroyed the market for evening newspapers.

The “Golden Age” is associated with the emergence of a new class of “press barons,” such as Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. Like their counterparts in the industrial and commercial economy, these men sought to relentlessly expand their operations and to drive their competition out of business. New York City remained the focus of these mega-publishers because of its huge, concentrated population and the high-level of interest in world affairs in “the city that never sleeps.” In this era before mass suburbanization, most newspapers were sold “on the street,” not delivered to the homes of subscribers. Along with the *Sun*, mentioned in the last lecture, the New York *Herald* and the New York *Tribune* continued during this period to be highly successful and innovative newspapers even when flashier newcomers dominated (at least for a time) the circulation wars. This period also sees the *New York Times* slowly and sometimes painfully emerge as the nation’s “newspaper of record” under the ownership of Adolph Ochs.

Bennett’s *Herald* continued its success for many years after its founder’s death in 1872 and his succession by James Gordon Bennett, Jr. as owner and publisher. Although a playboy who spent a large part of his life living in Europe – mainly Paris – the younger Bennett was a savvy executive and hired good talent to run the paper in his absence. The advent of telegraph cable connections between the U.S. and Europe in the late 1860’s also made it possible for Bennett to communicate rapidly with the home office. To ensure unhindered contact with New York, Bennett and a partner actually paid to have a new cable laid across the Atlantic. Under Bennett, Jr., in 1880 the *Herald* created its European edition with headquarters in Paris and London. The *Herald* soon became the most successful American newspaper in Europe and went on to acquire the European editions of both the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times* in the 1930s. Gordon Bennett (as he is known in order to distinguish him from his father) paid for Henry Morton Stanley’s expedition to Africa in 1869 to find the missing Dr. Livingstone, in return for exclusive rights for the *Herald* to publish Stanley’s dispatches about the search. Bennett never tired of sponsoring sports events and contests of all sorts, both because he enjoyed them himself and also because they helped boost the *Herald*’s circulation. He remained in control of the newspaper until his death at age 77 in 1918.

The *Herald*’s longtime rival, Horace Greeley’s *Tribune*, had a similarly successful transition after the founder’s death in 1872. As noted earlier, Greeley had early on identified a young reporter from Ohio named Whitelaw Reid as an up-and-coming newspaperman and hired him away from the Cincinnati *Gazette* immediately after the Civil War. Reid more than confirmed Greeley’s judgment and took over management of the paper at the age of 31 in 1868. Upon Horace Greeley’s death in 1872, Reid became publisher of the paper. Ownership of the *Tribune* remained with Greeley’s heirs, however, and young Reid only succeeded in acquiring complete control after his marriage in 1881 to a wealthy young heiress – Elizabeth Mills – whose father had struck it rich in California gold. Thus, starting in 1881 Reid became

the *Tribune*'s publisher and sole owner and remained so until his death in 1912. Reid, like Greeley before him, was a strong Republican, but of the reformist variety known as "liberal" Republicans: he did not agree with the Radical Republicans about Reconstruction. His form of Republicanism became that of most of the Party in the post-Civil War years and led to his being appointed Ambassador to the France by president Benjamin Harrison in 1889 and then Ambassador to the United Kingdom under Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft from 1905 to 1912, the year of his death. Reid could not have been more different from the playboy who ran the *Herald*. Under his leadership the *Tribune* acquired a reputation for conservative, reliable reporting. In newspaper historian George H. Douglas's opinion,

Under Reid's management the Tribune was a very well-run paper, probably far better run than it had ever been under Greeley. It was the leading Republican paper in New York, the paper most likely read by the city's commercial elite. (Douglas, p. 88)

The Reid family continued to own the *Herald* and then the *Herald Tribune* (after 1924), until selling it to John Hay Whitney in 1958. Reid exemplified the melding of journalism and politics in the years after the Civil War. Horace Greeley perhaps took this trend further than anyone when he ran for president against Ulysses S. Grant in 1872 on the so-called "Liberal Republican" ticket. His candidacy was endorsed by the Democratic Party, still in disrepute in much of the country, and he campaigned as a reformer promising to banish the corrupt officials of the Grant Administration. Reid strongly supported Greeley's presidential ambitions, of course, but had no interest in elective office himself, preferring instead to enjoy the influence and amenities of the two most coveted ambassadorships America had to offer: Paris and then London. Interestingly, his great-grandson, Ogden Mills Reid, merged newspaper ownership with diplomacy during the 1950s, when he served as ambassador to Israel from 1959 to 1961 after serving as publisher of the *Herald Tribune* earlier in the 1950s.

Our next two newspaper barons -- Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst -- are much better known to posterity, both because of their colorful careers and because of their impact on the history of the American media.

In his 1999 book on the "Golden Age" of American newspapers, Prof. George H. Douglas writes that Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* "did more to create the American newspaper we know today than any other paper in our history" (p. 95). Pulitzer bought the *World* in 1883 after breaking into the newspaper business in St. Louis several years before. He was an immigrant from Hungary who arrived in the U.S. at the end of the Civil War with almost nothing and through grit and brains managed to become a major player in Missouri politics and then the newspaper business. He combined two money-losing newspapers in St. Louis into the *Post-Dispatch*, which soon became the city's premier morning newspaper. Before that, he had worked for a German language daily in St. Louis. His dynamic personality brought him success and enough wealth to aspire to a larger stage and in the 1880's New York City was where every newspaperman wanted to make his mark.

Pulitzer quickly established a Sunday edition of the *World* in addition to a rapidly growing evening edition of the paper. In 1895 a morning *World* came out, but was discontinued in 1905, although frequent "extras" meant the paper often appeared in new editions several times each day. He plowed the money he had earned in St. Louis into buying new, faster printing presses allowing him to expand the paper from eight, to twelve, to fourteen pages within a matter of three years. The paper combined the sensationalism of the old *Herald* with all manner of new features that appealed to readers from different walks of life. Its circulation skyrocketed from 15,000 daily in 1883 to 60,000 within one year and with a Sunday circulation of 100,000 a few months after that. Perhaps most importantly, it became the leader in advertising with nearly half the Sunday paper consisting of advertisements, many of them with illustrations (line drawings), a first in the city. Department stores, in particular, took large swaths of the

paper for their sales ads. As Douglas notes, “After only three years of Pulitzer management, the *World* was the most profitable newspaper in the nation, and Pulitzer was a wealthy man” (p. 96)

Pulitzer had discovered that working class New Yorkers wanted to read about crime, scandal and corruption and his newspaper would give these stories to them but also follow an editorial policy of calling for reform. The *World* was a forerunner of what came to be known as “muckraker” journalism and its various crusades against crime and corruption and its championing of the “little guy” made it the go-to news source for the great mass of New Yorkers. It was an avowedly Democratic newspaper, taking the side of labor against capital in most cases. In the first issue under his ownership on May 11, 1883, Pulitzer wrote that the *World* would be “dedicated to the cause of the people” and “will expose all fraud and sham, fight all public evils and abuses” and “will serve and battle for the people with earnest sincerity” (Quoted in Douglas, p. 103).

Seven years later, in 1890, the newspaper’s headquarters skyscraper was completed on the Park Row area of lower Manhattan where most of the city’s newspapers had their offices. The *World* tower overshadowed them all, at 345 feet to the top of its enormous golden globe roof, making it the tallest building in the world at that time. The newspaper itself occupied the top floors of the building with the first ten rented to various businesses. Pulitzer’s office, perched at the top, commanded a view of New York and New Jersey, which, unfortunately, he could not appreciate because he was technically blind. Oddly for a paper that made so many innovations in journalism, the *World* was still type-set by hand, the work of an army of 230 compositors who worked feverishly every day setting the type for every article and advertisement in the paper. Eventually, of course, they were replaced by linotype operators. Despite his wealth and his newspaper’s reliance on business advertising, Pulitzer remained a staunchly Democratic figure, at least editorially. A strike by newsboys at the end of the 1890’s, however, brought out Pulitzer’s animus toward labor unions. Only after three weeks of agitation did the “new-sies” win concessions from the *World* and the other major dailies, which finally agreed to reimburse the boys for unsold newspapers.

Perhaps more important in explaining the *World*’s success than its editorial policy was the expansion of the paper to include features such as a women’s page, puzzles, articles for young readers, ample sports coverage and other special interest supplements. The evening edition established in 1887 further increased the newspaper’s reach. Pulitzer reportedly told his chief editorial writer: “Remember every day in the year that though politicians read the editorial page they are probably only five percent of our readers, a larger portion of the remaining 95 per cent not being interested in politics at all” (Morris, *Pulitzer*, p. 286).

Then Pulitzer introduced the first Sunday comics section – in color – on November 19, 1893, which included a cartoon featuring the so-called “Yellow Kid.” In sum, Pulitzer created a newspaper that had “something for everybody.” His innovations were not always totally original, but he pushed them with such exuberance that the *World* soon became an indispensable part of millions of New Yorkers day.

Pulitzer took a page from the *Herald*’s book of tricks and sponsored the “round-the-world in 80 days” adventure of the young Nellie Bly, the pen name of *World* journalist Elizabeth Cochrane. This stunt lasted about 76 days from 1889 to 1890 and provided a further boost to the paper’s circulation. In 1886, Pulitzer announced a campaign to raise \$250,000 to build a pedestal for the new Statue of Liberty, due to arrive in New York that year. The *World* ran numerous “human interest” stories on poor New Yorkers who gave small contributions to erect the pedestal. Pulitzer promised that every contributor’s name would be etched into the pedestal in memory of their generosity. The campaign was a roaring success, and it increased the paper’s circulation (and advertising revenue) even more.

Pulitzer was not an easy man to work for. He constantly meddled in the daily operation of the papers (the Morning, Evening and Sunday *Worlds*) and went through a series of managing editors before finding Frank Cobb in 1905. Pulitzer suffered from detached retinas in both eyes and was totally blind by the early 1900s. The story has it that he recognized his inability to continue as operating head of the paper and gave Cobb a letter of resignation to print in the *World*, but Cobb instead gave the letter to the other New York papers, partly as a demonstration of his independence from the overbearing publisher, but also because he wanted to maintain at least a semblance of ongoing cooperation with Pulitzer. After Pulitzer's death in 1911, however, Cobb continued as the paper's managing editor.

Perhaps Pulitzer's most enduring accomplishment was the establishment in 1903 of the Columbia University School of Journalism and the Pulitzer Prize for journalistic excellence. The University of Missouri is often cited as having the first school devoted to preparing students for careers in journalism, but there was no such school in the nation's largest city and most important newspaper town until Pulitzer made a grant to Columbia to start such a program.

By the mid-1890's Pulitzer had a new and formidable opponent in the person of William Randolph Hearst, who acquired the New York *Morning Journal* in 1895 and immediately sought to outdo the *World* in sensationalism and advocacy of the common man. Hearst had been born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth. His father, George Hearst, had struck it rich in gold and silver mining in California and Nevada. After his only son flunked out of Harvard and George managed to finagle election as Democratic senator from California in 1887, the younger Hearst, who had long seen himself as a newspaper owner, took over the ailing San Francisco *Examiner*, which his father had purchased some years earlier to help further his political ambitions. The *Examiner* was a rather lame competitor to the city's major morning daily, the *Chronicle*. But William had seen what Joseph Pulitzer had done with the *World* starting in 1883 and was convinced that he could apply the same formula to turning the *Examiner* into a vibrant, money-making newspaper. After a few years, the younger Hearst engineered his move to the New York market with the purchase of the *Journal* (formerly owned by Pulitzer's brother Albert) and immediately opened up a campaign of journalistic warfare with the *World*.

Hearst hired away many of the *World*'s top staff by offering bigger salaries and more congenial working conditions (Pulitzer was a notoriously hard person to work for). He even acquired the cartoonist who drew the "Yellow Kid" comics. Hearst used bigger headlines and more sensationalism than even Pulitzer employed to win over readers. Within a few years, the *Journal* was claiming a circulation of over one million daily and to have grown past the *World*. One of Hearst's most important acquisitions from the *World* was young Arthur Brisbane, who would go on to be Hearst's right-hand man for the next forty years, following and amplifying Hearst's most flamboyant and outlandish impulses until his death in 1936. Pulitzer had pioneered the idea of a special Sunday edition of the newspaper, selling for five cents instead of the usual one or two cents. The Sunday paper became a cross between a newspaper and a magazine once Hearst got his hands on it. He bought new color printing presses to produce "Sunday Supplements," on subjects as varied as creatures from outer space or the latest in women's fashions. His largely immigrant readership lapped it up.

Starting in 1897, Hearst zeroed in on the Spanish suppression of Cuban revolutionaries as a cause célèbre. His newspaper more or less "declared war" on Spain and pressured the reluctant McKinley Administration to take any and all measures to oust the Spaniards from the island. It was the mysterious sinking of the U.S.S. Maine in Havana harbor in February 1898 that provided Hearst with all he needed to call for a declaration of war against Spain. With the *Journal*'s circulation soaring as a result of the war campaign, Pulitzer felt he had no choice but to join in the press war against the hapless Spaniards. Of course Hearst did not care anything about the Cubans or the Spanish. He only wanted to build his newspaper's circulation. He really had no principles to speak of. Pulitzer, on the other hand, later expressed regret that he had allowed his newspaper to join the madness that helped precipitate the war

with Spain. Pulitzer was actually an “anti-imperialist” who viewed such wars as simply another example of the rich and strong waging warfare against the poor and weak.

Hearst actually bought and outfitted an old freighter to use as a base and steamed to the coast of Cuba in July 1898. Once ashore, he and some other *Journal* reporters “captured” some twenty shipwrecked Spaniards and, after feeding and clothing them on Hearst’s ship, turned them over to the U.S. Navy. During his one month on the war front, Hearst kept up a steady stream of dispatches to the *Journal* even though he had to sail to neighboring Jamaica to send them.

Although the common belief that Hearst and the *Journal* had pushed the Administration into a declaration of war against Spain has been discredited by later historians, Hearst himself came out of the conflict with greatly enhanced credibility and his newspaper (really three newspapers, a morning, evening and Sunday *Journal*) was selling over one million copies per day. However, he was not making a profit. The cost of his various extravagances ate into the paper’s revenue and he was forced to turn to his mother (his father, who died in 1891, left his fortune to her exclusively) for subsidies which she was increasingly unwilling to provide. He finally managed to negotiate a truce with Pulitzer allowing both papers to dial back their costly competition, lay off excess personnel and raise the price to two cents daily.

Upon his return from Cuba, Hearst looked enviously at the fame Teddy Roosevelt had acquired with his Rough Riders and decided to make a plunge into Democratic politics by seeking elective office himself. While Roosevelt went on to win nomination and election as Republican governor of New York, Hearst had to settle for election to Congress for two terms from New York City. All his other attempts at elective office failed, leaving him a bitter and unsatisfied man.

Hearst, of course, went on to create the nation’s greatest media empire. At its height, his company owned over thirty newspapers as well as numerous magazines and its King Features syndicate sold the rights to comics, puzzles and other features to other newspapers across the country.

Two other newspaper giants of the “Golden Era” need to be mentioned: E.W. Scripps, the founder of what came to be known as the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain; and Adolph Ochs, a Tennessee-based Jewish newspaper entrepreneur who bought the stodgy, failing *New York Times* in 1896 for \$75,000 and presided over its rebirth as the most important newspaper in the country by the time of his death in 1936. Unlike Hearst-- and to a lesser extent—Pulitzer, neither Scripps nor Ochs had political aspirations themselves. Scripps identified with the workingman and Ochs became a solid backer of the Republican establishment both in New York and nationally, but assiduously sought to maintain an objective editorial policy often verging on moral blindness.

E.W. Scripps learned the newspaper business in Detroit, where his older brother James ran the afternoon *Detroit News*. When his brother refused to give E.W. greater say in the operation of the Detroit paper, Scripps started a newspaper in Cleveland on a shoestring, the *Press*. During the 1890s and early 1900s, Scripps rapidly started newspapers in other small to medium-sized cities throughout the Middle West and then in the Far West. His modus operandi was to find a market without a penny newspaper that served the working class population and to establish one of his four-page, tabloid style papers there, using the cheapest materials and labor he could find. While the printers and other press room workers were paid union rates, his editorial and business staff had to accept Scripps Company stock as part payment and work to make their newspaper profitable enough to pay. Many of them moved on to more lucrative reporting and editorial jobs elsewhere, but newcomers were always available to fill their shoes.

While Pulitzer and Hearst revolutionized the content of newspapers, particularly big-city dailies, Scripps concentrated on smaller cities and pioneered the use of hard-nosed business methods to wring profits from his often marginal publications. One recent academic study of Scripps writes that “his passion and

his lasting legacy to his industry was the development of the modern newspaper as a business.” (Baldasty, p. 2). During the period from 1880 to 1916, the number of newspapers in the country increased from 909 to 2,461, but Scripps estimated an additional 1,500 newspapers were started and abandoned between 1880 and 1910, many of them papers that Scripps himself had opened and then closed after a few years when they proved to be unprofitable. As in any new and growing industry, competition whittled down the number of concerns quite rapidly.

Scripps established a news service that supplied copy to his various newspapers over the telegraph lines. Bigger features were sent by mail, along with the printing materials necessary to reproduce them. Some of his papers in smaller markets like Spokane, Washington or Dallas, Texas were one-third to one-half news items supplied by the Scripps news service. Local coverage suffered, but the low price and labor friendly editorial policies attracted a large readership. Scripps also sought to produce newspapers that were not dependent on advertising revenue to succeed. In an era when most newspapers were already deriving two-thirds of their income from advertising, he managed to eke out a profit without being beholden to commercial interests.

Scripps most important innovation may have been the creation of the United Press Association as a rival to the quasi-monopolistic Associated Press. Merging his company’s news-gathering assets in the various markets where he had established papers to provide the copy, he managed to sign-up a large number of other, independent newspapers as users of the UP service. It was much cheaper than the AP and was available to any paper able to pay the annual fee, while the AP signed exclusive contracts with newspapers in many cities, making it impossible for any new papers to enter the market using AP materials.

Scripps idea of a chain of newspapers operating under strong, centralized management, often carrying much the same news items as their content, foreshadowed the coming of other chains, such as those of Hearst and Gannett. After E.W.’s death in 1926, his newspaper empire continued to grow, especially in the 1920s, when it came under the control of Roy Howard, a working reporter who personified the crusading newspaperman of the Interwar Years. After 1922, the firm was known as the Scripps-Howard Company in recognition Howard’s role in managing the enterprise.

Finally, we have the story of Adolph Ochs and his infusion of new life into the old *New York Times* after his purchase of the paper (with borrowed money) in 1896. The *Times* had once been a great newspaper under founder Henry J. Raymond until the late 1860’s and then under his successor George Jones, who led the paper’s expose of the Tweed Ring scandal. After Jones’s death in 1891, management of the paper devolved on the managing editor, Charles A. Miller, although ownership remained in the hands of the Jones family. Under Miller the *Times* seemingly lost its way and failed to keep pace with new developments in the newspaper business. By 1896, when Ochs came to New York in search of a newspaper to buy, the *Times* had sunk to last place among morning dailies in the city with an actual circulation of only about 9,000, despite printing some 23,000 copies daily. By comparison, the morning *Herald* had a circulation of 140,000 and Pulitzer’s *World* a daunting 200,000. Soon Hearst’s morning *Journal* would enter the field and quickly rival these two giants. In 1893 a group of wealthy investors, chief among which was the Equitable Insurance Company, had bought the *Times* from the Jones family and sought to make it the voice of the conservative wing of the Democratic Party. Miller remained as managing editor and part owner, but the national depression that struck in 1893 further eroded the paper’s advertising revenue and by 1896, the *Times* owners, including Jacob Schiff and J.P. Morgan, were in search of a new man to save the paper as the voice of financial orthodoxy in the face of the Populist wave spreading across the country. This was when Ochs appeared on the scene.

Ochs believed there was room in the city for a morning paper that avoided sensationalism and partisanship and stuck to straight news reporting. One of his first acts was to come up with the slogan

“All the News the Fit to Print,” and this promise soon found its way to the masthead of the paper where it remains to this day. Many of the newspapers backers came from the city’s business community and Ochs found common purpose with them identifying “business news as the province of the *New York Times*.” (Douglas, p. 124). He quickly added a Sunday supplement and a Saturday book review section. It was his idea to put a “News Condensed” column on the front page, a standard feature of newspapers today. His success was almost immediate, both circulation and advertising revenue increased rapidly and by the end of his first year running the paper it was selling 22,000 copies on weekdays and 28,000 copies on Sundays.

Still, the paper was not making enough money to invest in new presses or pay higher wages to its staff. Ochs then had the brilliant idea of reducing the daily price of the paper to one cent. Both the *World* and Hearst’s *Journal* sold for two cents and other papers were even more expensive. Instead of losing revenue, the price reduction boosted circulation (and thus advertising revenue) and by 1900 it was selling 100,000 copies per day. Ochs’s contract called for him to take full ownership of the paper (its debts as well as its assets) after three years of profitable operation. This was achieved in 1900.

In 1904 the *Times* opened its new headquarters building on Broadway between Sixth and Seventh Avenues in what had been a rather run down part of the city. Ochs managed to get the city to name the planned subway station in front of the building “Times Square” and in the years to come this location in the heart of the entertainment district proved to be the epitome of New York for residents and visitors. Also in 1904 Ochs hired Carr V. Van Anda as the *Times* managing editor, a job he would hold until 1932. Van Anda is often considered the greatest managing editor in American newspaper history. He had an almost unerring sense of what was important to feature on page one and elsewhere in the paper and how the news should be presented. There was nothing flashy about the writing in the *Times*, but the reporters got the facts straight and presented them in a clear and concise fashion.

Ochs became a very wealthy man because of his risky bet that he could revive the *New York Times*, but he remained a modest and, at times, awkward figure in the newspaper world. Like Joseph Pulitzer, he hailed from a Jewish background, but sought to downplay his religious and ethnic identity. Like many Jews of German origin, he sought to assimilate into the Gentile world of the American upper class and even opposed President Wilson’s appointment of Louis Brandeis as the Supreme Court’s first Jewish justice, because he did not like Brandeis’s support for the Zionist cause and feared his connection with the labor and social justice movements would stimulate the underlying anti-Semitism always present in the United States. Nevertheless, the *Times* would still have to contend, from time-to-time, with the slander that it was a “Jewish” newspaper.

In 1936, Adolph Ochs died while on a visit to his old hometown of Chattanooga and the ownership of the *Times* passed into hands of his only child, his daughter, Iphigene, and her husband Arthur Sulzberger. The Ochs/Sulzberger family has continued to own and manage the paper up to the present day. In Lecture VI, I will talk about the *Times* during the Sulzberger era.