

Lecture V

The Newspaper and the Advent of Electronic Media

1920 to Present

In this lecture and the final one, we will look at the last few decades of the newspaper's dominance of the media world and its gradual replacement by radio, television and then the internet as the means by which the public learns about events and gets analysis of the news.

The 1920s were, in many ways, the apex of the newspapers influence, with the advent of the tabloid format newspapers, the nationally syndicated columnists, the glorification of journalists seeking the truth and breaking a story, and the sheer volume of newsprint that flooded the average American home or office. We also see the beginning of the newsmagazine, with *Time*, and the coming of the newsreel, with photography becoming a crucial addition to the news reporting profession. Until the 1980's most newspapers used the "letterpress" printing technique in which the photos consisted of thousands of tiny dots engraved on the printing plate. The resulting photos, when printed on standard newsprint paper lacked clarity and tended to smudge. The offset printing technique and whiter paper in more modern newspapers allows the reproduction of sharper images, both black and white and color. But, for many years, starting in the 1920s, the flashbulb equipped photo camera remained the standard tool of photojournalists. Their work appeared most famously in *Life* magazine starting in 1938, but even the lower quality of the prints in the daily newspapers became standard fare during the 1930s. Now the newspapers started to be filled with pictures and the sketch artists who used to provide a visual dimension to the news were pretty much confined to the court rooms, where photography was not allowed.

One of the first newspapers to take advantage of this new technology was the New York *Daily News*, founded in 1919 by Joseph Medill Patterson, a member of the McCormick-Patterson family which also owned the Chicago *Tribune*. Instead of the dense word-filled pages of the New York *Times* or the *Herald Tribune*, the *Daily News* devoted large swaths of its pages to photos of celebrities and politicians, with huge headlines and a minimum of text. The new daily billed itself as "New York's Picture Newspaper." It was a hit from the start and grew by the end of the 1930s to a daily circulation of two million, and to a Sunday circulation of 4.6 million by 1946, the largest ever achieved by an American newspaper. The Hearst organization quickly followed suit with its tabloid, the *Mirror*, which claimed to be "90 per cent entertainment and 10 percent information" and reached a circulation in the mid-1920s of 370,000 (Douglas, p. 229). Another tabloid, the *Daily Graphic* made even less pretensions of seriousness and quickly gained a circulation of 200,000 in 1926. This last entry in the tabloid market featured suggestive photos, often posed, but could not compete with the *Daily News*, which sold a record-setting 750,000 copies on the basis of its photo of Mrs. Ruth Snyder's electric chair execution for the murder of her husband.

The decade's most interesting newspaper, however, was Pulitzer's *World*. Under the shaky management of his son Ralph, the paper corralled an unrivaled group of columnists, from the intellectual pundit Walter Lippmann, to the often-raunchy sports maven Heywood Hale Broun. The newspaper's editor starting in 1921, Herbert Bayard Swope, was primarily responsible for the *World's* excellence during the decade. In addition to in-house pundits like Lippmann and Broun, Swope contracted with a host of other "outside" writers to fill the new "op-ed" page (short for "opposite editorial) with a daily series of must-read columns. The columnist Franklin P. Adams had his "Conning Tower" and Broun his "It Seems to Me" while other contributors such as H.G.Wells, Ring Lardner, Alexander Woolcott, Dorothy Parker – to name just a few – enlivened the newspaper and more than made up for the *World's* relative weakness in the reporting of hard news, where it was unable to keep up with the *Times* or the *Herald Tribune*. The latter, a product of the 1923 merger of two great morning papers, ate into the *World's* circulation and

when, in 1925, the paper's management foolishly raised their newspaper's price from two to three cents, it lost readers to the other quality dailies which remained at two cents. Also instrumental in the *World's* demise was the advent of the tabloids, many of which carried syndicated columnists as well as splashy headlines and lurid pictures. Swope's resignation in 1928 seemed to foretell the paper's decline, which the stock market crash a year later and the ensuing Great Depression turned into a near death experience. In 1931 the Pulitzers sold the paper to Roy Howard's Scripps-Howard chain which merged it into their morning New York *Telegram*, creating the *World-Telegram*. Howard slashed the paper's personnel, leading to a strike by the journalists and printers and the creation of a newspaper union, the American Newspaper Guild. In a way, the *World's* brief, glorious career mirrored much of the 1920's, when brilliant writers and artists of all sorts enjoyed an epic run that ended with an economic disaster. It also became clear by the end of the decade that there were just too many daily newspapers in New York – in 1923 there were *seventeen* English-language dailies in the city, plus several more foreign language papers -- and the economic downturn inevitably brought about the demise of some of them.

The 1920's also saw the growing dominance of newspaper chains, such as Scripps-Howard and Hearst, and the smaller, but highly profitable Tribune Company, owner of the eponymous Chicago daily and the tabloid *Daily News* in New York. These three chains remained under the control of the already mentioned Roy Howard and William Randolph Hearst, and the irascible Chicago publisher Col. Robert McCormick and his cousin by marriage, Joseph Medill Patterson, all of whom would live into the post-World War II era. These large chains enjoyed certain economies of scale, which allowed them to share costs and all three had profitable non-newspaper businesses, although these businesses were usually media-related, like magazines, radio and, eventually, television stations.

The Hearst chain was the most famous -- or infamous -- of the big chains. The imperious William Randolph Hearst has already been mentioned in connection with the newspaper war between his New York *Journal* and Joseph Pulitzer's *World* during the late 1890s. After championing the working class and advocating many populist reforms such as direct election of senators and an income tax, Hearst discovered during the Spanish-American War that red-blooded Americanism -- some would say "jingoism" -- had widespread appeal and could sell newspapers. In 1901 he changed the name of his flagship morning newspaper from the *Journal* to the New York *American*, while retaining the name New York *Evening Journal* for the newspaper's evening edition. He graced the masthead on the front page of the *American* with the stirring motto: "An American Paper for the American People" and an emblem with a picture of an eagle. The two papers merged in 1937, becoming the *Journal-American* and continued publication until 1966. Over the years, Hearst's editorial policy took on an increasingly nationalistic and isolationist tone. He opposed American involvement in the World War I and World War II -- until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. His papers were against the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations, and during the early 1930s maintained good relations with Mussolini's fascist Italy and even with Adolph Hitler, paying both dictators to write columns in the Hearst newspapers. By 1938, Hearst had become a full-blown Red Scare alarmist, accusing Roosevelt of currying favor with American communists and ballyhooing Congressional investigations into supposed communist infiltration of the federal government. These anti-communist campaigns continued after World War II and "Red-Hunting" columnists such as Westbrook Pegler and Walter Winchell were prominently featured in the Hearst newspapers.

The Hearst newspapers -- some twenty-eight by the mid-1920s -- were rather consistent money losers, but Hearst seemed to have unrestricted access to bank loans and also launched a program in which the public could invest in the Hearst Corporation's bonds, selling millions of dollars in such securities which paid a substantial dividend, much of it financed by the loans on which the Corporation had to pay considerable interest. This Ponzi-scheme financial system worked only because the Corporation's non-newspaper operations were highly profitable, particularly its magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Good Housekeeping*. After nearly going bankrupt in the late 1930's, the Hearst Corporation was saved by the

public's insatiable demand for news with the outbreak of World War II, which caused circulation to skyrocket even as advertising revenue plateaued. By the mid-twentieth century, the company's stable of magazines brought in well over fifty per cent of its revenue. Hearst had also plunged into the moving picture business after 1914, establishing his Cosmopolitan Studios in New York City. His enthrallment with the twenty-year-old Marion Davies, who would become his life-long mistress, seems to have been a major reason for his entry into the early movies. Davies became a leading star in the silent pictures era, but her career petered-out during the 1930s once the talkies became the exclusive movie technology. Despite his various distractions – the movies, buying all manner of art works, constructing vast residences like San Simeon along the California coast, and costly months-long European vacations -- Hearst continued to oversee with great attention his string of newspapers. He even started a daily newspaper column which he required all his newspapers to carry in which he inveighed against various foes, foreign and domestic. Until his death in 1936, his right-hand man, editor-in-chief Arthur Brisbane, parroted much of Hearst's thinking in front-page editorials in the New York *American* which were syndicated to hundreds of other newspapers throughout the country. Brisbane's column "Today" was read by an estimated twenty million people on a typical day during the 1920's.

Hearst's involvement in politics continued during the 1920s and 1930s, but he now preferred to seek to use his newspapers to achieve political influence rather than to pursue elective office himself – a pursuit at which he had been notably unsuccessful for many years. After originally claiming to be a Democrat (in 1896 the *Journal* was the only major newspaper to support the candidacy of William Jennings Bryan rather than William McKinley, for instance), Hearst moved steadily to the right. He supported Herbert Hoover, until Hoover proved to be a major failure as president, and then oddly backed the cranky Texan, House Speaker John Nance Garner, for president in 1932, but finally relented and got Garner to throw his support to Franklin Roosevelt at the Democratic convention in return for agreement to name Garner FDR's running mate. Hearst had a love-hate relationship with Roosevelt that finally resolved itself into all hate by the late 1930s.

Despite his militant right-wing editorial policies and his rather dictatorial control of his newspapers, Hearst was quite a genial and generous man. Col. Robert McCormick, the scion of a wealthy Chicago family, on the other hand, was socially awkward and totally lacked the human touch, but shared most of Hearst's right-wing proclivities. McCormick took control of the Chicago *Tribune* from his older brother Medill before World War I and, over the course of the next forty years, built it into one of the most successful (and profitable) dailies in America. The Chicago newspaper scene in the 1920s, with the constant rat-a-tat of gangsters guns and prohibition vice, provided the material for Ben Hecht's gritty comedy, *Front Page*. Hecht wrote for the Chicago *Daily News*, an afternoon paper. In addition, Hearst's morning *Herald* and afternoon *American* vied for readership in the city where Al Capone and other gangsters raked in huge profits from speakeasies, prostitution houses, and various other rackets. But looming over this rowdy scene was Col. McCormick and the city's dominant newspaper, the morning *Tribune*. McCormick immodestly tagged the *Tribune* "The World's Greatest Newspaper." He used the initials from this slogan as the call letters for his radio station – WGN – and later the city's premier local television station. In the early 1920s McCormick erected a 36 story gothic-inspired tower on North Michigan Avenue as the newspaper's headquarters and ran the publication with an iron hand from his palatial 24th floor office. (The *Tribune's* current owners recently sold the building and it is to be converted into condominiums). To control the cost of newsprint, the single largest expense of the newspaper, he built several paper mills in Ontario and along the St. Lawrence River in Quebec and a small fleet of ships to carry the giant rolls of paper to Chicago where they were unloaded from a dock on the Chicago River directly into the subterranean storage and press rooms under the *Tribune* Tower. These mills also provided paper for the *Tribune*-owned New York *Daily News*. In many ways, his grandiosity recalled that of Joseph Pulitzer or Adolph Ochs, both of whom created imposing headquarters buildings in New York for their dailies.

McCormick's editorial policies were unfailingly right-wing and xenophobic, especially with regard to Great Britain, for which he had a deep dislike.

One of the most profitable parts of the Hearst and McCormick (or Tribune) companies turned out to be their features divisions, which sold the company's comic strips, puzzles, romance advice, and other columns to local papers throughout the U.S. Hearst's King Features had corralled such popular comics as "Blondie," to add to its earlier successes such as the "Katzenjammer Kids," "Mutt and Jeff," "Maggie and Jiggs," "Barney Google," and, later, "Krazy Kat" and then during the 1930s a host of strips based on superheroes like Flash Gordon, the Phantom, and Prince Valiant. These characters made their creators millionaires and opened endless "tie-in" possibilities, with the company licensing toys and games featuring these characters. Over at the *Tribune*, the major comic strip characters included "Dick Tracy," and "Little Orphan Annie." Tracy, drawn by an Oklahoman named Chester Gould, was largely the creation of the promotional genius of McCormick's cousin, Joe Patterson, who, while overseeing the development of the *Daily News* in New York, remained McCormick's co-manager in Chicago. In a session with Gould, who aspired to draw a strip for the *Tribune*, Patterson suggested the detective's first name and the name of his love interest, Tess Trueheart, and also the initial strip, involving a robbery at Tess's apartment in which her father is killed and Tracy is called in to pursue the criminals. The *Tribune* syndicated these and many other strips. National interest in the welfare of Little Orphan Annie and her dog Sandy were, if anything, stronger than that accorded Dick Tracy. Thousands of letters poured into the *Tribune* after the strip failed to appear one day in the 1920s due to a disagreement between cartoonist Harold Gray and Patterson over whether or not Annie should be adopted by Daddy Warbucks. Patterson said it would ruin the strip if she was and Sanders only agreed after a one-day strike. The Sunday *Tribune* bulged with advertising and features (usually weighing in at about two and one half pounds) and continued through the 1950s to be a must read (except for the news and editorials) in my boyhood home. We bought both the *Tribune* and the *Sun-Times* every Sunday morning – one for the features and the other for the news and commentary.

Given the strength of the dollar in post-World War I Europe (and, really, everywhere in the world), American newspapers could afford to maintain a large number of foreign correspondents, whose reports on life in Paris, London, Rome, or Moscow arrived in New York or Chicago, usually by cable, but also by express mail (to save money). In the mid-1920s, the *Tribune* hired a young William Shirer as correspondent in Vienna, then New Delhi, and, finally, in Berlin, where during the 1930's he joined NBC and became one of the most astute observers of the growing menace of the Hitler regime. McCormick had a knack for finding talent, and then letting it go. Shirer was a typical example of this unfortunate trait. The *Tribune's* prominence in Europe can be attributed to the Colonel's service in France during World War I, which gave him the belief that he understood France and Europe (which he didn't), and his desire to influence European affairs after the war by making the Paris *Tribune* "an exponent in Europe of everything American." (Smith, p.) His chief correspondent in Berlin during the 1920s was George Seldes, whose reporting often deviated from McCormick's hard-right take on politics, but was so respected that he was called back to the U.S. to brief President Coolidge on developments in Russia, from which he had recently been expelled. Seldes became an equal opportunity iconoclast when he was expelled in 1925 for his unfriendly reporting on the Mussolini regime. After he resigned in 1927, his deputy, Sigrid Schultz, became one of the most respected observers of the Hitler regime in the 1930's. The Hearst newspapers maintained some thirty foreign correspondents around the world. Scripps-Howard specialized in Latin American news in the 1920s, but eventually lost out to the Hearst organization, which recruited newspaper editors in Brazil and Argentina with lucrative deals. During the 1930's, Ron Howard gained entrée to the offices of practically every major world figure, producing interviews that captured the views of the era's dictators and democratic leaders. Of course less well-known reporters for the Associated Press and Scripps's United Press as well as Hearst's International News Service provided a steady stream of copy on foreign events to subscribers throughout the U.S.

The New York *Herald* published a daily European edition starting after World War I, which eventually became the most successful American daily in Europe. The *Tribune* sold its operation in 1933 to the *Herald*, however, and the *Times* eventually merged its operations into the *Herald*, as well. Starting in the 1960s, after the demise of its New York namesake, the *International Herald Tribune* became a mainstay of the American expat community as well as other English-speaking (or reading) peoples. For many years the paper was jointly owned by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* and is now totally owned by the *Times*.

Foreign news came to dominate the front pages of the major newspapers in the late 1930s and then with World War II and the onset of the Cold War, the papers found a steady audience among their readership for reports on foreign developments. In addition to the above-mentioned William Shirer, Americans followed events in 1930s Europe through the columns of America's foremost woman journalist, Dorothy Thompson. After being expelled from Nazi Germany in 1934 because of her anti-Hitler reporting, she went to work for the *Herald Tribune*, writing a daily column entitled "On the Record." In 1936 she added a daily radio program with NBC. Between her column and radio broadcasts, she became the most read and listened to American correspondent – of any gender. While foreign news coverage increased, the editorial pages of most American newspapers maintained a strong isolationist bias, especially notable in the Hearst newspapers and those owned by the Tribune Company. The *Tribune* started a daily in Washington called the *Times-Herald* in the late 1930s to push its America First agenda and to counter the more liberal *Washington Post*, the city's major morning paper. Joe Patterson's daughter, Cissy, ran the paper during the war years and into the immediate post-war period and maintained a steady stream of anti-Roosevelt and then anti-Truman editorials and news coverage. The paper failed to gain enough readership and advertising to turn a profit after the late 1940s and was purchased by *Post* owner Eugene Meyer in 1953. The *Washington Evening Star* continued to provide a second voice in the nation's capital until its demise in 1981. We still have the *Washington Times*, started in 1982 with financial backing from the Unification Church of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, an influential Korean evangelical Christian. The paper continues to be owned by the Moon Church through a separate holding company. It claims a circulation of 52,000 daily (as of 2019).

With the demise of most of the Hearst newspapers and the post-World War II transition of news distribution to television and now the Internet, the so-called "mainstream press" consists of only a few major dailies, most prominently the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. The red-blooded Americanism formerly associated with the Hearst and Tribune newspapers, is now found mainly in broadcast news organizations like Fox News, and in news websites operating on shoestring budgets and often purveying highly unreliable news reports. It is a worldwide phenomenon that people prefer to obtain their news electronically and have largely abandoned the print media, making the traditional newspaper an endangered species.