

## Introduction

The chapters that follow introduce you to a brief examination of the history of newspapers in America. My purpose here is to offer you a guide to the course and the subjects we'll be talking about over the next month or two.

This course examines the political, economic, cultural influences that made the press what it was in various periods of U.S. history. Rather than simply run through a list of dates, names, and places, I attempt to bracket key periods in newspaper history in the context of what was going on in the social, political, and economic cultures of the United States and how they shaped and were shaped by the press. It's a history that is not always precise or intuitive, but I hope you will find it as fascinating and important as I do.

### Where to begin

Even the starting place is conflicted. September 25, 1690, is the date *Publick Occurrences, Both Forreign and Domestick* [sic], the first newspaper printed in the colonies, was published in Boston by Benjamin Harris, a printer although he didn't print his own paper. But the authorities shut the newspaper after one edition and for that reason, the lack of periodicity despite Harris' stated intent to keep publishing monthly, some historians don't date the first newspaper until John Campbell's *Boston News-Letter* in 1704, which did publish for many years. For our purposes, we'll give Harris his due and join those historians who say he got there first.

This course's end point, somewhere around 1912, is less obvious. One has to stop somewhere, and for historians, finding where and even how to stop can be challenging. Although – or possibly because – ending the examination at 1912 yields an awkwardly

precise but quirky number – 222 years – it makes sense to call it quits there. 1912 or the two-to-five years thereafter mark the end of the so-called “long nineteenth century” and the eve of the Great War that would forever change Western history and America’s place in the world. Technological, economic, and cultural upheavals were afoot. If newspapers entered the twentieth century confident in their role and supremacy in delivering information and opinion to the nation, the early years of the second decade would yield significant challenges to how Americans received their news. Radio and motion pictures would become increasingly powerful draws on people’s time, attention, and spending, and a couple of decades later, the visual and the audio would be combined in the television, a profound change and to some the beginning of the end of the printed page.

### **A selective history**

This is a survey course. Compressing more than two centuries into ten weeks inevitably means that certain facets and historical moments – many, in fact – must merely be sketched in (or left out altogether). We may mention magazines and other artifacts of the print culture, but at best only in passing. One could reimagine this course solely in terms of power, again starting in 1690 with the government’s absolute power to control the press, winding through the Peter Zenger trial of 1735, the First Amendment of 1791, and so on, but that is for another course. Or, a case can be made for an economic turn, envisioning media history in terms of the traditional economic inputs – land, labor, capital, and entrepreneurship – and how they changed the press over time.

Although there is no required homework in this course, it is strongly encouraged that you read these essays on each class’s topics. Through these annotated essays you

should gain greater understanding and insight into topics that we will go over quickly in class.

Still, the goal of this course is to give you a brief, admittedly idiosyncratic way of looking at the role of the press in key periods of American history. You should come away with a better understanding of what made the U.S. press what it was and how the press made the U.S. what it became. Although journalists and their readers of the early twentieth century might have thought otherwise, the history of the press in America is not whiggish – there's no onward and upward, everything-for-the-best. Indeed, if we were to run the timeline out into mid-twentieth century, we'd see that a medium that seemed all-powerful early in 1900 was by mid-century fragile and by 1999 was about to fracture.

### **Breaking things down**

By breaking this history into ten periods – Colonial Press, Revolutionary Press, Press of the New Republic, Partisan Press, the Penny Press, Civil War press, Antebellum Press, Yellow Press of the 1890s, and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – the successive eras may seem to have an inevitability about them at times, and at others may strike students as discrete and unrelated. Nevertheless, we'll try to connect some dots.

The following chapters do not simply repeat the class lectures they accompany; they are intended to supplement them. Chapter 1 addresses the first newspapers in the North American colonies and takes us to 1740, a sort of origin story showing how various experiments in publishing and editing settled on a form that exists to this day. The chapter also lays out the continuing tension between government and journalists that likewise exists to the twenty-first century.

Chapter 2 focuses on newspapering leading up to and through the American Revolution, a time when territory and newspapers changed sides many times, and highlights how newspapers were instrumental in giving the colonists an identity as Americans.

Chapter 3 examines the press of the Early Republic and takes the story through the 1820s, asking, among other questions, whether politics and the media today are any more or less hyperpartisan than they were at the turn of the eighteenth century.

Chapter 4 will offer a brief history of control and censorship.

Chapter 5 looks at the American newspaper, 1830s-1850s, to see how the Industrial Revolution and the looming Civil War affected newspapering in America. Topics include the Penny Press, the telegraph and the creation of news wire service, and how changes in the American social, political, and economic scene influenced newspapers.

Chapter 6 focuses on the antebellum abolitionist press.

Chapter 7 features news gathering during the Civil War and the print culture of Chapel Hill, 1861-65.

Chapter 8 takes up the post-war developments into the 1890s, including the Yellow Press and the rise of newspaper barons and conglomerates.

Chapter 9 is about advertising over the period of study.

Chapter 10 comprises a journal article on the Muckrakers and their relation to journalism in the late twentieth century.

### **Footnotes, sources, and sourcing**

A note about the mechanics: Some historians like to say that “the bibliography is in the footnotes,” and so it is here. Rather than a formal, separate bibliography, full citations are given in footnotes relating to specific facts and sources throughout the text in the belief that this approach offers informative context to the notes unavailable from simply a list of appealing but unrevealing titles. The footnotes themselves are a mix of bibliographic (who said it and where can it be found) and discursive (mini comments, amplification, or discussions that one hopes readers will find helpful and to the point).

Sourcing in historical research often is challenging. The people you’d like to interview may be long gone; their letters and other papers may not have survived – if any ever existed – or are locked away in family or even institutional collections, unbeknownst to the general or even specialized public, or even the owners. Scholars must be sensitive, too, to the flip-flop of primary and secondary sources. A newspaper, for instance, is a secondary source when the researcher is trying to find out what happened in, say, the Boston smallpox epidemic of 1721 by reading what was reported in the news columns. It becomes a primary source when the question is “*How* did the newspaper report on this?” The point turns on what is being studied, the unit of analysis; an event or the portrayal of an event. Even here, the issue can be murky. A handwritten diary or letter is clearly a primary source. But does that diary or letter become a secondary source when it’s in a published volume? On such issues graduate seminars are founded.

Whether the ephemera – personal papers, newspapers, photographs, and the like – even survives to be studied is problematic. For the chapters published here, the sources are selective and opportunistic; purposive choices have been made from among surviving

newspapers and further winnowed by their appearing either in the databases of Readex, Accessible Archives, the American Antiquarian Society, *The New York Times*' historical database; or in the Library of Congress' searchable "Chronicling America. Historic American Newspapers" collection,<sup>1</sup> among other sources.

As always, I welcome your questions and suggestions, either from the chapters here, our class presentations, or both.

– **Frank E Fee Jr.**

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<sup>1</sup> "Chronicling America. Historic American Newspapers," Library of Congress. Accessed at <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>.