CHAPTER 1

THE REVOLUTION IN AMERICAN JOURNALISM IN THE AGE OF EGALITARIANISM: THE PENNY PRESS

BY BIRTH, education, and marriage, James Fenimore Cooper was an American aristocrat. For him, power and prestige were always near at hand. But he was also an ardent nationalist, a great admirer of Jefferson and even Jackson. His novel *The Bravo* (1831) honored the July Revolution in France. It sought to expose those people in society who were "contending for exclusive advantages at the expense of the mass of their fellow-creatures."[1]

The Bravo was written during Cooper's seven-year sojourn in Europe from 1826 to 1833. In that time Cooper developed "a lofty detachment from the fears natural to his own class, and a warm sympathy for the lower classes that in Europe were, and in America might be, deprived of their political rights."[2] But detachment did not last. The America Cooper found on his return seemed far different from the Republic he remembered. Cooper felt that a new breed of individuals

seeking only their own ends was threatening the bonds of community. His growing disaffection led him to attack American newspapers. He did so in an extended series of libel suits; in his characterization of a newspaper editor, the disgusting Steadfast Dodge who appeared in *Homeward Bound* (1838) and *Home As Found* (1838); and in *The American Democrat* (1838), a short work of political criticism. In that work he wrote:

> If newspapers are useful in overthrowing tyrants, it is only to establish a tyranny of their own. The press tyrannizes over publick men, letters, the arts, the stage, and even over private life. Under the pretence of protecting publick morals, it is corrupting them to the core, and under the semblance of maintaining liberty, it is gradually establishing a despotism as ruthless, as grasping, and one that is quite as vulgar as that of any christian state known. With loud professions of freedom of opinion, there is no tolerance; with a parade of patriotism, no sacrifice of interests; and with fulsome panegyrics on propriety, too frequently, no decency.[3]

Perhaps this is suggestive of the state of the American press in the 1830s; more surely it represents a protest of established power against a democratized—in this case, middle-class—social order. Cooper expressed a deep anxiety about the moral influence of the press which appeared to him to be "corrupting," "vulgar," and without decency. It had in his eyes the unwelcome characteristics of a middle-class institution: parochialism, scant regard for the sanctity of private life, and grasping self-interest. Most disturbing of all, it had enormous and unwarranted power over the shaping of opinion.

Cooper's fears of a "press-ocracy" were exaggerated, but he was responding to real changes in American journalism. In 1830 the country had 650 weeklies and 65 dailies. The average circulation of a daily was 1,200, so the total daily circulation was roughly 78,000. By 1840 there were 1,141 weeklies and 138 dailies. The dailies averaged 2,200 in circulation for an estimated total daily circulation of 300,000.

Population during the same period was also growing, but more slowly—from 12.9 million to 17.1 million, urban population increasing from .9 million to 1.5 million.[4] But Cooper was not responding to statistics. He knew that newspapers were different, not just more numerous, than the ones he left behind in 1826, and those most different—the "penny papers"—appeared most powerful. The new journals reflected political, social, and technological changes that a thoughtful man might well have been alarmed about. It is now widely agreed that the 1830s, a remarkable decade in so many ways, marked a revolution in American journalism. That revolution led to the triumph of "news" over the editorial and "facts" over opinion, a change which was shaped by the expansion of democracy and the market, and which would lead, in time, to the journalist's uneasy allegiance to objectivity.

The Revolution of the Penny Press

When Cooper left America, as when Tocqueville visited a few years later, the typical American paper was generally a weekly, but there were already many dailies in seaboard cities. The typical daily was four pages long. Its front page was almost exclusively devoted to advertising, and the fourth page likewise was strictly advertising. These outside pages were like the cover of a book or magazine—one turned to the inside to find the content of the paper. Page two carried the editorial columns. Much of page two and page three detailed the arrival of ships in the harbor and the contents of their cargoes, as well as other marine news. On page two one could find an editorial on politics, as well as short "items" of news. Many of the "items" were lifted directly from other newspapers, with credit generally given. Other items were not

distinguished, in layout, typography, or style, from editorial—all were expressions of the editor or his party.

Some newspapers were primarily commercial, others were political. The political papers gave greater emphasis to news of national politics. They were financed by political parties, factions of parties, or candidates for office who dictated editorial policy and sometimes wrote the editorials personally. There was nothing deceptive about this—it was standard practice and common knowledge. The party papers were dependent on political leaders, not only for their initial capital and their point of view, but for maintenance through the paid publication of legal notices when the party they backed held power. Edwin Croswell ran the *Albany Argus,* the organ of the Democratic Party in New York, from 1824 to 1840, during which time he was also official state printer. This was the most lucrative post in the state; Croswell estimated it was worth $30,000 a year. Thurlow Weed of the *Albany Evening Journal* succeeded Croswell as state printer. He stated that he and his two partners grossed $50,000 in 1841, though Croswell put the figure at $65,000.[5]

The commercial press and the party press had several important features in common. First, they were expensive. A paper ordinarily cost the reader six cents an issue at a time when the average daily wage for nonfarm labor was less than eighty-five cents. But a person could not buy one issue at a time except at the printer's office. Newspapers were generally sold only by subscription, and annual subscriptions ranged from eight to ten dollars. Not surprisingly, circulation of newspapers was low, usually just one to two thousand for even the most prominent metropolitan papers. Newspaper readership was confined to mercantile and political elites; it is no wonder, then, that newspaper content was limited to commerce and politics.

This is not to say that these papers were staid or sedate. True, dominated as they were by advertising and shipping

news, they appear to have been little more than bulletin boards for the business community. But their editorials, in which they took great pride, were strongly partisan, provocative, and ill-tempered. Editors attacked one another ferociously in print, and this sometimes carried over into fist fights or duels. The New York diarist Philip Hone recorded one such incident in 1831:

> While I was shaving this morning I witnessed from the front windows an encounter in the streets between William Cullen Bryant, one of the editors of the Evening Post, and Wm L Stone, editor of the Commercial Advertiser. The former commenced the attack by striking Stone over the head with a cowskin; after a few blows the parties closed and the whip was wrested from Bryant and carried off by Stone.[6]

Editing a newspaper was an intensely personal matter. Early newspapers were small operations. One man generally served as editor, reporter (insofar as there was any reporting at all), business manager, and printer. But the personal character of these early papers should not be misunderstood. Many editors were subservient to their political masters and, at the same time, very limited in their views on what was acceptable to put in print. "Journalists," wrote New York editor James Gordon Bennett's contemporary biographer, "were usually little more than secretaries dependent upon cliques of politicians, merchants, brokers, and office-seekers for their position and bread. . . ."[7] Not until the revolution in the press of the 1830s did the editor's ability to express himself in his newspaper grow, and then it grew in new directions—the editor made himself known, not only through editorials, but through the industry, enterprise, and innovation in his news gathering. Paradoxically, the newspaper became a more personal instrument at the same time that it began to emphasize news rather than editorial.

We can trace this development in a makeshift way by examining the names of newspapers in different periods.

THE AGE OF EGALITARIANISM: THE PENNY PRESS

Before the 1830s, when newspapers sought the readership of commercial elites, they named themselves accordingly. In Boston, in 1820, the two dailies were *The Boston Daily Advertiser* and the *Boston Patriot and Daily Mercantile Advertiser.* In Baltimore, the dailies in 1820 were the *American and Commercial Daily Advertiser,* the *Federal Gazette and Baltimore Daily Advertiser,* the *Federal Republican and Baltimore Telegraph* (formerly the *Federal Republican and Commercial Gazette*), the *Morning Chronicle and Baltimore Advertiser,* and finally the *Baltimore Patriot and Mercantile Advertiser.* More than half of all newspapers published weekly or more frequently in New York, Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Washington, Charleston, and New Orleans in 1820 had the words "advertiser," "commercial," or "mercantile" in their titles. But, after 1830, few newspapers were founded which bore such names. Instead, there were a great many papers whose names express a kind of *agency*—names like "critic," "herald," "tribune." One might also include as part of this development the papers named "star" or "sun," for both words suggest active objects which illuminate the world. So newspapers, if we can judge from their titles, became less passive, more self-consciously expressive of the editor's personality and convictions after 1830.[8]

The movement from "advertisers" to "heralds" and "suns" in the 1830s has been called the "commercial revolution" in the American press.[9] The "commercial revolution" refers not to all newspapers in the period but to those which most radically broke with tradition and established the model which the mainstream of American journalism has since followed. These were the "penny papers." As the name suggests, what was most obviously original about them is that they sold for a penny, not six cents. Further, rather than selling by annual subscription, they were hawked in the streets each day by newsboys. Their circulation was correspondingly enormous compared to the six-penny journals.

The first penny paper, the *New York Sun*, first published September 3, 1833, had the largest circulation of any paper in the city within a few months—by January, 1834, it claimed a circulation of 5,000. Within two years it was selling 15,000 copies a day. The *Sun* was quickly followed by two other penny papers in New York—the *Evening Transcript* and, on May 6, 1835, James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald*. In June, 1835, the combined circulation of just these three papers was 44,000; when the *Sun* began in 1833, the combined circulation of all of the city's eleven dailies had been only 26,500.[10]

The penny press spread to the country's other urban, commercial centers—Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. The *Boston Daily Times* appeared February 16, 1836, and within weeks was the city's largest paper, claiming a circulation of 8,000 by the middle of March. In Philadelphia, the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* began March 25, 1836, organized by William Swain and Arunah Abell, New York printers and friends of Benjamin Day, and their partner Azariah Simmons. The *Public Ledger*'s circulation was 10,000 within eight months, and 20,000 after eighteen months, at a time when the largest of the established dailies in the city sold about 2,000. The *Baltimore Sun* was founded in 1837 by Arunah Abell with the backing of his fellow *Public Ledger* proprietors. Within nine months its circulation was over 10,000, more than triple the circulation of any other Baltimore paper.[11]

The penny papers made their way in the world by seeking large circulation and the advertising it attracted, rather than by trusting to subscription fees and subsidies from political parties. This rationalized the economic structure of newspaper publishing. Sources of income that depended on social ties or political fellow feeling were replaced by market-based income from advertising and sales. Sales moved to a cash

basis, and the old complaints of editors about subscribers who would not pay declined. Advertising, as well as sales, took on a more democratic cast. First, advertising in the established journals, which heretofore had addressed the reader only insofar as he was a businessman interested in shipping and public sales or a lawyer interested in legal notices, increasingly addressed the newspaper reader as a human being with mortal needs. Patent medicines became the mainstay of the advertising columns.[12] "Want ads" became a more prominent feature of the papers; when P. T. Barnum moved to New York in the winter of 1834–1835 to find a job in a mercantile house, he conducted his job search by reading the "wants" each morning in the *Sun*.[13]

Second, advertising became more strictly an economic exchange, not a moral one: older journals had often refused to print ads for what they believed to be objectionable advertising. The *Journal of Commerce* in New York would not accept advertisements of theaters, lotteries, or "business to be transacted on the Sabbath." The *New England Palladium* in Boston followed a similar policy. The *New York Evening Post* banned lottery advertising and, by the late 1820s, this was fairly common. The penny press, in contrast, was not very fussy about who advertised in its columns. Penny papers were self-righteous in defending their wide-open practices:

> Some of our readers complain of the great number of patent medicines advertised in this paper. To this complaint we can only reply that it is for our interest to insert such advertisements as are not indecent or improper in their language, without any inquiry whether the articles advertised are what they purport to be. That is an inquiry for the reader who feels interested in the matter, and not for us, to make. It is sufficient for our purpose that the advertisements are paid for, and that, while we reserve the right of excluding such as are improper to be read, to the advertising public we are impartial, and show no respect to persons, or to the various kinds of business that fill up this little world of ours. One man has as good a

right as another to have his wares, his goods, his panaceas, his profession, published to the world in a newspaper, provided he pays for it.[14]

This comment from the *Boston Daily Times* could not better express a policy and a morality of laissez faire. In this, it was representative of the penny press. With an over-the-shoulder nod to propriety, the penny papers appealed to the equal right of any advertiser to employ the public press, so long as the advertiser paid. The self-righteousness of the penny papers, compared to the established press, was peculiarly inverted: they proudly denied their own authority or responsibility for exercising moral judgment in advertising matters and defended this position, without embarrassment, as consistent with their self-interest.

The six-penny papers criticized the penny press for its advertising policies and centered especially on the large number of patent medicine ads. Bennett's *Herald* was the special butt of this criticism. It became the object of abuse from penny papers as well, including Horace Greeley's penny *New York Tribune,* established in 1841, and Henry Raymond's penny *New York Times,* founded in 1851. These papers, it is fair to surmise, coveted Bennett's readership. Greeley criticized the *Sun* and the *Herald* in 1841 for taking the ads of New York's leading abortionist, Madame Restell. On the other hand, the *Tribune*'s columns were themselves filled with patent medicine advertising, and when a reader complained, Greeley wrote: "He should complain to our advertisers themselves, who are not responsible to us for the style or language (if decent) of their advertisements, nor have we any control over them."[15] In 1852 the *Times* wrote that the *Herald* was "the recognized organ of quack doctors."[16] This was, however, the narcissism of small differences: the same issue of the *Times,* for instance, included ads for "The American Mental Alchemist," Dr. Kellinger's Liniment, Doctor Houghton's Pepsin, and Ayer's Cherry Pectoral; both

the *Times* and the *Herald* that day ran about two thirds of a column of medical ads. All the penny papers, to greater or lesser degrees, adopted the language and morality of laissez faire.

No less original than the economic organization of the new journalism was its political position. Most of the penny papers, including all of the pioneers in the field, claimed political independence, something that earlier papers rarely pretended to. James Gordon Bennett felt that this was closely tied to the economic design of the penny paper, the "nonsubscriber plan," as he called it, of selling on the streets. Only the penny press could be a free press, he wrote, "simply because it is subservient to none of its readers—known to none of its readers—and entirely ignorant who are its readers and who are not."[17] The penny papers were not only formally independent of political parties but were, relatively speaking, indifferent to political events. The *New York Sun*'s lead on a short item of congressional news was not unusual: "The proceedings of Congress thus far, would not interest our readers."[18] The *Sun* had announced in its first issue that its object was "to lay before the public, at a price within the means of everyone, all the news of the day, and at the same time afford an advantageous medium for advertising." No mention of politics. Early issues of the *New York Transcript* featured fiction on page one and inside focused on local items that rarely included politics. One issue, for instance, included short paragraphs on attempted rape, riot, attempted suicide, mail robbery, stingless bees from Mexico, and even news of an abandoned child left in a basket on a doorstep.[19] A year later, it should be added, articles were longer, there was more court reporting, and there was more news of national politics.

The *Transcript,* like some other penny papers, advertised its divorce from politics. The paper announced in its inaugural issue that, so far as politics goes, *"we have none."* The *Boston Daily Times* claimed to be "neutral in politics" and

advised political parties to find the way into the newspaper columns by advertising. The *Baltimore Sun* proclaimed:

> We shall give no place to religious controversy nor to political discussions of merely partisan character. On political principles, and questions involving the interests of honor of the whole country, it will be free, firm and temperate. Our object will be the common good, without regard to that of sects, factions, or parties; and for this object we shall labor without fear or partiality.[20]

While some penny papers failed, at least at first, to attend very much to politics at all, others covered politics more completely than the six-penny press, and just as vigorously. But even these papers, like the *New York Herald,* did not identify their mission or their hopes with partisan politics; to some extent, the world of parties became just a part of a larger universe of news. The penny papers were not all determined to be politically neutral. Horace Greeley's aim in establishing the *New York Tribune* in 1841 was to found "a journal removed alike from servile partisanship on the one hand and from gagged, mincing neutrality on the other."[21] But even Greeley's avowal of principled partisan politics supports the general point, for Greeley contrasts the *Tribune* to the "gagged, mincing neutrality" he surely associated with some of his penny rivals.

The penny press was novel, not only in economic organization and political stance, but in its content. The character of this originality is simply put: the penny press invented the modern concept of "news." For the first time the American newspaper made it a regular practice to print political news, not just foreign but domestic, and not just national but local; for the first time it printed reports from the police, from the courts, from the streets, and from private households. One might say that, for the first time, the newspaper reflected not just commerce or politics but social life. To be more precise, in the 1830s the newspapers began to reflect, not the affairs of an elite in a small trading society, but the activities of an

increasingly varied, urban, and middle-class society of trade, transportation, and manufacturing.

The six-penny papers responded to the penny newcomers with charges of sensationalism. This accusation was substantiated less by the way the penny papers treated the news (there were no sensational photographs, of course, no cartoons or drawings, no large headlines) than by the fact that the penny papers would print "news"—as we understand it—at all. It was common for penny papers, covering a murder trial, to take a verbatim transcript of the trial and spread it across most, or all, of the front page. What the six-penny press decried as immoral was that a murder trial should be reported at all. The typical news story was the verbatim report, whether it be of a presidential address, a murder trial, or the annual statement of the United States Treasury.

News became the mainstay of the daily paper. The penny papers did not depend on the usual trickle of stale news but sought out the news. They took pride in their activity, as the *New York Transcript* made clear in 1834:

> There are eleven large and regularly established daily papers in this city; and with the exception of the *Courier and Enquirer,* and perhaps the *Times,* not one of them employs a news reporter, or takes any other pains to obtain accurate and correct local information—on the other hand there are two small daily NEWS papers, (ourselves and our cotemporary,) and those two employ four reporters, exclusively to obtain the earliest, fullest, and most correct intelligence on every local incident; and two of these latter arise at 3 in the morning, at which hour they attend the police courts, and are there employed, with short intermissions, till the close of the office at 8 in the evening, while others are obtaining correct information about the city.[22]

In 1835 the *Herald* joined the *Transcript* and its "cotemporary" the *Sun* and, by the end of 1837, boasted two Washington correspondents, permanent correspondents in Jamaica and Key West; occasional correspondents in London, Philadelphia, and Boston; two Canadian correspondents dur-

ing the MacKenzie Rebellion of 1837; and a correspondent roving New York State to report on the wheat crop. This was expensive, the *Herald* noted, but it was done to gratify the public.[23] A year later the *Herald* had hired six European correspondents as regular contributors.[24]

The institution of paid reporters was not only novel but, to some, shocking. Until the late 1820s, New York coverage of Washington politics relied mainly on members of Congress writing occasionally to their home papers. Some regular "letter writers" passed on dull reports and summarized speeches. James Gordon Bennett, writing in 1827 and 1828 for the *New York Enquirer,* initiated more lively reporting with his dispatches on "the court of John Q. Adams."[25] Adams never accommodated himself to the impudence of the new journalism. He wrote with disgust in his diary in 1842 that sons of President Tyler "divulged all his cabinet secrets to a man named Parmalee and John Howard Payne, hired reporters for Bennett's *Herald* newspaper in New York. . . ."[26] His use of "hired" to qualify "reporters" suggests how new, and perhaps disreputable, the institution of a reportorial staff was.

One way to see the dominance of the newspaper by news, which the penny press initiated, is to regard it as the decline of the editorial. This is much less than the whole story, but it was one of the ways in which contemporaries understood the change they were witnessing. In an article in *North American Review* in 1866, Horace Greeley's biographer James Parton sought to explain the phenomenal success and influence of James Gordon Bennett's *New York Herald.* Parton reviewed current opinion about the *Herald.* One view was that the *Herald* rose to prominence because it was a very bad newspaper, pandering to the bad taste of the public. A second view, and Parton's own view, was that the *Herald* succeeded because it was a very good newspaper—but that the newspaper had become something different from what the *Herald*'s

critics assumed it to be. Parton argued that people who thought the *Herald* a bad paper spoke mainly of its editorials which, he admitted, were execrable. Bennett was ornery, prejudiced, misanthropic, and opportunistic, and his editorials reflected his nature. But, Parton went on, the editorial is dying and only the news is the "point of rivalry" between papers. The success of a journal had come to depend "wholly and absolutely upon its success in getting, and its skill in exhibiting, the news. The word *newspaper* is the exact and complete description of the thing which the true journalist aims to produce."[27]

News was, indeed, the point of rivalry with the penny papers. We have so completely identified the concept of "news" with the newspaper itself that it may be difficult to understand how dramatic a change the penny press represented. Until the 1830s, a newspaper provided a service to political parties and men of commerce; with the penny press a newspaper sold a product to a general readership and sold the readership to advertisers. The product sold to readers was "news," and it was an original product in several respects. First, it claimed to represent, colorfully but without partisan coloring, events in the world. Thus the news product of one paper could be compared to that of another for accuracy, completeness, liveliness, and timeliness. The *Herald* in 1840 crowed over the accuracy and fullness of its report of a speech by Daniel Webster and ridiculed a Mr. Stansbury, reporting for a six-penny paper, who "knows nothing of stenography and wrote out some thirty or forty pages of small quarto foolscap, in long hand."[28] The *Herald* patted itself on the back, on one occasion, for having had the only reporter on the school-visiting trip of the City Council and School Fund commissioners and, on another, for having been the only paper in the city to print the United States Treasurer's report in full.[29] As for the timeliness of news, the *Herald* and the *Sun* rivaled each other in printing "extras" and praising them-

selves for it. The *Herald,* for instance, boasted on November 21, 1840, of its extra on the day before announcing the arrival of British forces in Canton: *"No other newspaper establishment in New York had the news at that time, nor could they get it, they are so inefficient and lazy."* [30]

During the first decades of the nineteenth century, newspapers had increasingly tried to be up-to-date, especially in reporting the arrival of ships and in printing the news they brought with them. The New York papers began to send out small boats to incoming ships to gather up news; in the late 1820s, several papers formed an association which bought a fast boat to meet the ships for all association members. But only with the penny press was the competition for news "beats" firmly established as the chief basis of the newspaper business. Thanks to James Gordon Bennett, even advertising became more timely. Until the 1840s advertisers paid a flat fee, often on an annual basis, to place the same notice in a paper day after day. In 1847 Bennett announced that, beginning January 1, 1848, all ads in the *Herald* would have to be resubmitted daily. This encouraged changing ad copy so that Bennett's managing editor, Frederic Hudson, exclaimed in his history of American journalism:

> . . . the advertisements form the most interesting and practical city news. They are the hopes, the thoughts, the joys, the plans, the shames, the losses, the mishaps, the fortunes, the pleasures, the miseries, the politics, and the religion of the people. Each advertiser is therefore a reporter, a sort of penny-a-liner, he paying the penny. What a picture of the metropolis one day's advertisements in the *Herald* presents to mankind![31]

The penny papers' concept of news not only created news as a marketable product whose attributes—particularly timeliness—could be measured, it invented a genre which acknowledged, and so enhanced, the importance of everyday life. In literature until the eighteenth century, aristocratic

conventions had dictated that the common aspects of everyday life could receive only comic treatment, if they were dealt with at all.[32] A similar convention appears to have prevailed in journalism—newspapers simply did not report on the lives of ordinary people. Although the War of 1812 ended the almost exclusive dominance of foreign news in the American press, local or hometown news, before the penny papers, remained a minor feature. The commercial press proved less reliable in reporting local prices of commodities or stocks than in reporting foreign news and shipping news.[33] The penny press, in contrast, focused on the nearby and the everyday, and for the first time hired reporters on a regular basis to cover local news. Reporters were assigned to the police, the courts, the commercial district, the churches, high society, and sports. The penny papers made the "human interest story" not only an important part of daily journalism but its most characteristic feature.

The penny papers saw news in ordinary events where no one had seen anything noteworthy before. This is nowhere better indicated than in those moments when even the most aggressive penny papers had a hard time claiming there had been any news. In an item headed "The News of the Week," the *Herald* of March 12, 1837 wrote:

> THE NEWS OF THE WEEK
>
> Is not of very much importance. Yet the most insignificant events can be swelled to matters of great moment, if they are traced up eternity to their causes, or down eternity to their consequences. Not a single incident—not the slightest event that does not become a part of the time past or the time to come, and thus mix with the greatest everlasting both in time and in space. The news of a day—of a week—is supposed by the superficial blockheads who conduct newspapers and govern nations—or cheat the public—or sell quack medicine—or stir up politics—or shave in Wall Street, to be of trifling moment. And so it is to them. To the philosopher who dips deeply into things, it is different.[34]

The penny papers inaugurated this democratic attitude toward the happenings of the world: any event, no matter how apparently trivial, might qualify for print in a newspaper.

The attention to everyday life did not necessarily mean attention to the familiar. The penny papers printed much that would appeal to the ordinary middle-class reader precisely because it was exotic—it concerned the everyday lives of other classes. Benjamin Day at the *Sun* pioneered the coverage of the criminal, especially in reporting police news. Bennett, from the *Herald*'s earliest days, reported on the social affairs of the elite of New York and Saratoga. As was usual with Bennett, he advertised his own innovation:

> No one ever attempted till now to bring out the graces, the polish, the elegancies, the bright and airy attributes of social life. We never can be an indepennent [*sic*], a happy, an original people, unless we rely on our resources, either for fashion, gaiety, politics, potatoes, flour, or manufactures. Our purpose has been, and is, to give to the highest society of New York a life, a variety, a piquancy, a brilliancy, an originality that will entirely outstrip the worn out races of Europe, who have been degenerating for the last twenty generations.[35]

Diarist Philip Hone recorded the presence of a *Herald* reporter at a fancy dress ball he attended in 1840. The host consented to the presence of the reporter, Hone wrote, because this imposed on the reporter "a sort of obligation . . . to refrain from abusing the house, the people of the house, and their guests, which would have been done in case of a denial." Hone continued: "But this is a hard alternative; to submit to this kind of surveillance is getting to be intolerable, and nothing but the force of public opinion will correct the insolence. . . ."[36] Public opinion was in no such mood. Bennett devoted most of page one to this ball, suggesting that it "created a greater sensation in the fashionable world than anything of the kind since the creation of the world, or the fall of beauteous woman, or the frolic of old Noah, after he left the ark and took to wine and drinking."[37]

The attention to the everyday, and particularly the focus on the social life of the rich, helped obscure the division of public and private life. For an editor like Bennett, little was privileged, personal, or private—though he was cautious enough in his reports on high society to use initials rather than names. Penny papers introduced news of family squabbles and scandals. While notices of marriages and deaths were familiar in newspapers, printing birth announcements was not. When the *Pittsburgh Daily Express* advocated the propriety of recording births in the papers, Bennett's sarcastic comment in the *Herald* indicated his approval, while protecting his flank of propriety: "Why, the practice would rouse up all the Miss Squeamishes in the country. It is no argument that they do such things in England; they do a great many things in England that would not suit here!"[38]

In February, 1848, a Washington correspondent for the *New York Tribune,* writing under the name "Persimmon," sketched the luncheon habits of Representative William Sawyer of Ohio. His article detailed how each day at two o'clock Sawyer moved from his seat in the House to a place behind and to the left of the Speaker's chair, near the window, and proceeded to take out his lunch. He would unfold a greasy paper and eat the bread and sausage it contained, wipe his hands on the paper, and throw the paper out the window. He used his jackknife for a toothpick and his pantaloons and coatsleeves for a napkin. Sawyer objected to this coverage and his friends succeeded in passing a resolution (119 to 46) ousting all *Tribune* reporters from their seats or desks on the House floor. "What was the offense of the 'Tribune,' after all?" asked the *Tribune* correspondent in a later article. "Nothing in the world but stating a few facts, not against the moral character of anybody, but about the personal habits of a member of the House."[39]

Shortly before this incident, the House had failed to censure the organ of the Democratic administration for call-

ing a member of the House a liar. That was a kind of journalism they were used to. The new journalism of the penny press, on the other hand, ushered in a new order, a shared social universe in which "public" and "private" would be redefined. It is no wonder that this should have appalled those who believed the early days of the American Republic had re-established the elevated public realm of the Greek city-states and the Roman Forum. Something new was threatening this idyll, something Hannah Arendt refers to as the creation of *society,* "that curiously hybrid realm where private interests assume public significance."[40] Both meanings of interest—self-aggrandizement and curiosity—seem fitting here. With the growth of cities and of commerce, everyday life acquired a density and a fascination quite new, "society" was palpable as never before, and the newspapers—especially the penny papers—were both agent and expression of this change.

Granting that this fairly describes the changes in American journalism in the 1830s, what can account for it? Why did it happen? More precisely, why did it happen when and where it did? Recapitulating, what took place is that a cheap press originated in the 1830s in New York, a city which was already the national hub of interurban trade, transportation, and communication.[41] It quickly spread to the other leading urban centers—Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. The new press was distinctive economically—in selling cheaply, in its distribution by newsboys, and in its reliance on advertising; politically—in its claims to independence from party; and substantively—in its focus on news, a genre it invented. What accounts for all this?

These changes in journalism were closely connected to broad social, economic, and political change which I shall refer to as the rise of a "democratic market society." This meant the expansion of a market economy and political

democracy or, put another way, the democratization of business and politics sponsored by an urban middle class which trumpeted "equality" in social life. To show that this is what was happening in the 1830s and to relate it to journalism is to do more than conclusive and compact evidence will allow. But there is much to make the case persuasive. It becomes all the more appealing when the inadequacies of likely alternative explanations are made plain. The two that require most attention are the technological argument and the literacy argument.

Explanations of the Revolution in Journalism

The Technological Argument

The technological argument is the powerful idea that technological advances in printing and related industries and the development of railroad transportation and later telegraphic communications were the necessary preconditions for a cheap, mass-circulation, news-hungry, and independent press. This idea is more a reflex in commentary on American journalism than a well-considered theory, but it is a common and fundamental reflex and bears examination.[42]

The pertinence of a technological explanation to radical changes in journalism in the 1830s is beyond question. The wooden, hand-powered press, practically unchanged since Gutenberg, was transformed in the early nineteenth century. The first iron presses came into use at the turn of the century. While no faster than the wooden presses, they were easier to operate and the quality of their impressions was higher. A series of mechanical innovations in the next two decades improved these flatbed hand presses, but the manually

powered presses began to give way to steam and the flatbed design to a cylinder press. The first book in America printed by a steam-driven press was published in 1823. By the 1840s the steam press dominated the American market. The change from the flatbed to the cylinder press was just as important. Frederick Koenig pioneered in both developments, inventing a steam-powered cylinder press which was first used to print the *London Times* of November 29, 1814. It produced one thousand sheets per hour per side, roughly ten times faster than the best flatbed hand press. Still, it was not instantly accepted. The cylinder press required greater skill to use than the flatbed press, and the quality of the work it produced was not great. Further, its productivity far outstripped the needs of most printers, so its use was confined to newspapers and magazines. The first two-cylinder press was the "Hoe Type Revolving Machine," first operated for the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* in 1847. The Hoe machine, and its improvements, became standard equipment for the world's newspapers in the nineteenth century. The speed and convenience of the cylinder press were increased in the 1850s and 1860s when "stereotyping" (casting plates for printing from molds) was perfected for curved plates.

What may have been the most important technical development of the early nineteenth century came in paper manufacture. During the eighteenth century, scarcity of paper was the greatest problem for printers. Paper was made primarily from rags. In an early effort in consumer ecology, popular education stressed the preservation of rags which were then picked up by carts to be taken to the paper mills. In 1799, N. L. Robert patented the Fourdrinier paper-making machine, still using rags for raw material. (Not until 1844 would a process be developed to make ground wood pulp available for paper, and it was not introduced to the United States until 1866.) By the late eighteenth century, processes for reducing rags to pulp had developed faster than processes for transforming the

pulp to paper. The Fourdrinier process changed this and, after 1827, when it was first imported, was widely used in America.[43]

None of these improvements were unrelated to changes in transportation. The development of railroads and canals in the early nineteenth century made it possible for the best equipment in manufacturing to reach a wider market. In 1810 the two-hundred-odd American papermills furnished newsprint only to nearby localities, but, during the 1830s, railroad transportation began to carry the best products of the best machinery to more distant places. In 1830 the United States had only twenty-three miles of railroad. In 1840 it had three thousand and would have thirty thousand by the Civil War.[44]

Needless to say, these developments were crucial to the rise of high circulation newspapers and helped make it possible to sell newspapers cheaply. (At the same time, one might add, they made starting a newspaper a more weighty capital investment.) But the causal relationship did not go only one way. Most of the early nineteenth century developments were merely mechanical—few could not have been developed, in terms of the world's supply of knowledge, decades, or even centuries, before. Invention in printing and paper manufacture was not autonomous but was stimulated by other factors. The increasing demand for books and newspapers was what one historian of printing called a "permanent incentive to invention."[45] A far from negligible factor was that newspapers themselves supported inventors. Koenig's work was subsidized by John Walter, proprietor of the *Times*. In America, the penny papers were consistently the first to install the latest machinery in printing. Indeed, it may be more accurate to say that the penny press introduced steam power to American journalism than to say that steam brought forth the penny press. The *New York Sun* printed its first edition on a flatbed hand-run press making two hundred

impressions an hour. Within a few months editor Benjamin Day announced the purchase of a cylinder press making one thousand impressions an hour. By that time the *Sun* was already a spectacular success, rivaling the largest six-penny papers in the city with a circulation of four thousand. By 1835, when the *Sun* became the first newspaper in the country to purchase a steam-driven press, its circulation was already approaching twenty thousand.[46]

The development of the telegraph illustrates a similar interaction between technological change and business enterprise in journalism. The telegraph came into use in the 1840s, after the penny press had proved itself. The newspapers encouraged the development of the telegraph, and this was especially true of a penny paper, the *Baltimore Sun*. The first telegraph line in the United States was an experimental line between Washington and Baltimore. The *Sun*'s early use of it encouraged wider acceptance of telegraphic communication, although most of the press, like most of the public, was at first unwilling to believe, or unable to comprehend, its promise.[47] The *Sun*'s printing of the telegraphically communicated news of President Polk's war message in 1846 was reprinted in Paris by the French Academy of Sciences alongside an authenticated copy of the original address; this demonstration of the accuracy of the telegraph helped persuade the French government to make appropriations for a Paris-Brussels telegraph line.[48] While Robert Luther Thompson, in his history of the American telegraph industry, argues that the outbreak of the war with Mexico in 1846 "virtually forced" newspapers to use the telegraph, the evidence he cites suggests something different. He indicates that James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald,* Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune,* Moses Beach, the new editor of the *New York Sun,* and William Swain of the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* made the first and fullest use of telegraph services.[49] Only the penny press, then, exploited the telegraph, just as the penny papers

had been first to use new machinery in printing. Penny papers specifically, not newspapers generally, made use of the telegraph; the peculiar disposition of the penny press to seek timely news, not an irresistible attraction of fast news service in wartime, is important here.

The modern mass-circulation newspaper would be unimaginable without the technical developments of the early nineteenth century. They obviously facilitated the rise of the penny press. But they do not explain it. Technological change was not autonomous and itself begs explanation. And while it made mass circulation newspapers possible, it did not make them necessary or inevitable. Further, while the technological argument relates to the low cost and high circulation of the penny papers, it says nothing at all about their distinctive content.

The Literacy Argument

A second hypothesis is worth considering. We could say that schooling and widespread literacy developed in the nineteenth century and stimulated the demand for newspapers. Because new readers were unsophisticated, their tastes tended to be simple, concrete, particular, and local. Not only would this explain the growth of newspaper circulation, but it would explain the emphasis in the penny press on local news and human interest.

This hypothesis, which, like the technological argument, appears as a kind of reflex in histories of journalism, is difficult to investigate.[50] While it is hard to trace the effects of technology, it is at least easy to know when technology is introduced or altered. It is hard to know anything at all about literacy in the early nineteenth century. Most historical studies of literacy are, at best, studies of illiteracy. That is, we can know what percentage of married men in a particular village were so illiterate that they could not sign their own marriage certificates. But we do not know whether or not they

could read.[51] Nor do we know what we can assume of those who did sign their own names. Could they have read a broadside? a newspaper? the Bible? Blackstone? Did they? Would they have wanted to or needed to?

Without literacy, large-circulation newspapers are impossible. But is an increase in literacy in itself a stimulus to newspaper circulation? There are good reasons to doubt it. In general, we make too much of a fetish of the term "literacy." The difference between not being able to read at all and being able to read a bit may not be socially or psychologically significant; it may not represent much of a leap in mental powers or capacities for abstraction. It may be simply a marginal increase in receptivity to an environment which includes some print. Becoming literate is not primarily a question of the intelligence of the learner and the availability of formal instruction; it has more to do with the nature of the environment and the character of instruction.

This condenses two points. The first point is that the nature of the environment constrains the development of literacy. "The most pervasive factor of all in restricting literacy," Ian Watt writes of eighteenth-century England, "was probably the lack of positive inducement to learn." He goes on:

> Being able to read was a necessary accomplishment only for those destined to the middle-class occupations—commerce, administration and the professions; and since reading is inherently a difficult psychological process and one which requires continual practice, it is likely that only a small proportion of the labouring classes who were technically literate developed into active members of the reading public, and further, that the majority of these were concentrated in those employments where reading and writing was a vocational necessity.[52]

If Watt is right that people learn to read when reading becomes important, then the literacy argument should be inverted. Rather than looking for direct evidence of literacy,

we might instead seek reasons why literacy would be necessary or encouraged and *presume* from that a growth in literacy. Rather than reading through the marriage records, we should look for the use of the written word in advertising posters and shop signs; we should look for the growth of coffeehouses, artificial lighting, and newspapers.[53] The appeal in the history of newspapers, the history of books and printing, and the history of literature and culture to the changing "demands" of a growing literate public very nearly puts the cart before the horse. No doubt it is true that a literate society is radically different from a nonliterate society, and the invention of writing was surely a sea change in human consciousness.[54] But the spread of literacy to the illiterate portion of a literate society is quite another matter—more subtle, more complex, and, very likely, as much a result of increased printing as a cause of it.

But even this formulation—that literacy follows inducements to it—is too narrowly conceived. This is the second point: learning to read is a social process dependent for its success on who is teaching, what kind of reading materials are being used, and how the students feel about themselves. The Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, has written of the larger human context of literacy:

> Learning to read and write ought to be an opportunity for men to know what *speaking the word* really means: a human act implying reflection and action. As such it is a primordial human right and not the privilege of a few. Speaking the word is not a true act if it is not at the same time associated with the right of self-expression and world-expression, of creating and re-creating, of deciding and choosing and ultimately participating in society's historical process.[55]

What would explain a rise in literacy, then, in a literate society, would be an extension of political and economic rights or, more generally, an extension to more persons of the sense that they are actors in history. That Americans were more

likely than Europeans to have this sense in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may help account for the country's reputation as unusually literate and attached to reading.[56]

What would account for an absence of widespread literacy in a literate society would be any conditions preventing the participation of people in the society's decision making. There is evidence for nineteenth century England which supports this. It appears that the rudiments of literacy were available in England before literature developed to improve or exploit it. There apparently was a literate working-class public able to read newspapers before 1820. The circulation of several of the radical papers ran far ahead of that of the leading daily, the *Times,* or the leading weekly, the *Observer.* These latter papers had circulations only slightly larger than their six-penny American counterparts. But Cobbett's two-penny *Register* ran forty to sixty thousand copies a week in 1816–1817. The *Northern Star* sold ten thousand papers a week within its first four months during the Chartist movement. At its height in 1839, it sold forty to sixty thousand copies a week.[57]

Was this a "demand" for newspapers? Or was it a result of "inducements" to a reading public? If a demand, why was the demand so fitful, rising and falling with the availability of radical political papers and radical political hopes? If a demand, why so specific, failing to increase the circulation of the major dailies? If a general "demand" for newspapers in a competitive market, why did it fail to force the major dailies to lower their prices and seek a wider readership? The notion of "demand" explains nothing by itself. As for "inducements," there are different kinds, and the strictly occupational inducements that Watt writes about, important as they may appear, may be less vital than the whole range of social changes, many of them political, that enable persons to emerge from what Freire calls the "culture of silence."[58]

To state the case more modestly, literacy is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for a growth in newspaper circulation. Kenneth Lockridge's study of literacy in colonial New England is relevant here. Lockridge found that, in 1660, 60 percent of New England males signed their wills; it was 70 percent in 1710, 85 percent in 1760, and 90 percent by 1790. He estimates that half of those unable to sign wills could read. Thus, there was practically universal adult male literacy in New England by 1790. Lockridge links this to a Protestant educational impulse and strengthens his case by showing that literacy elsewhere in the colonies was lower than in New England, while literacy in other devoutly Protestant countries—Scotland and Sweden—was remarkably high.[59]

But what did the literacy of New England and Scotland and Sweden do for advances in printing technology? What did it do for newspaper circulation? It did nothing at all. The main reading material remained religious books. The extraordinary literacy rate did not produce a secular press, and when the cheap, high-circulation press appeared, it did not appear in these areas of highest literacy but in urban commercial centers and, most of all, in New York.

The Natural History Argument

The literacy argument begs important questions, but it has the merit of being a genuine explanation—a statement of a cause and its consequences and an effort to trace a reasonable connection between them. Most histories of American newspapers have sought only to describe, not to explain, the changes in American journalism. They take a Whiggish tone, intimating a natural progress toward the "modern" newspaper, though they never bother to define what "modern" means. The progress they see is from a captive press to a free, independent press. Walter Lippmann, in an essay written in 1931, provides a statement of this position more elegant than most but still representative of many of the works of historians and journalists-turned-historians. Lippmann suggests that any nation's press will naturally pass through stages of

development. In the first stage, the press is a monopoly controlled by government. The press then passes to a stage where political parties, not government, control publication. In the third stage, the press breaks from both government and party "by enlisting the commercially profitable support of a large body of readers." In the United States, of course, this stage begins with the penny papers. Lippmann sights a fourth, or "professional," era in journalism emerging after World War I. When this stage should reach full flower, he writes, newspapers would institutionalize the use of "trained intelligence." They would be so attached to the conscientious pursuit of an "approximation to objective fact" that they would be free even of the changing tastes and prejudices of the public itself.[60]

Lippmann intended to help usher in this final stage, but his essay suggests that it will evolve of its own accord. The view that the development of the press is governed by a self-explanatory evolutionary dynamic is made explicit in one of the few significant sociological comments on the press, Robert Park's 1925 essay, "The Natural History of the Newspaper":

> The newspaper, like the modern city, is not wholly a rational product. No one sought to make it just what it is. In spite of all the efforts of individual men and generations of men to control it and to make it something after their own heart, it has continued to grow and change in its own incalculable ways.[61]

The history of a newspaper, then, is a *natural* history, the story of the unfolding evolution of a social form. The modern newspaper is "the type that has survived under the conditions of modern life," and so the natural history of the press is the history of this "surviving species." It is, Park writes, "an account of the conditions under which the existing newspaper has grown up and taken form."

Park then makes a further specification: the struggle for existence, for a newspaper, is the struggle for circulation.

This is right, on the whole, for the period since the 1830s, wrong for any time before that. Part of the significance of the penny papers is precisely that they created a struggle for circulation. This is not the only instance where Park read a modern assumption of journalism back into the past. He argued that the first newspapers were "simply devices for organizing gossip." In fact, the first newspapers were more attuned to business and political news than anything resembling local "gossip." Park emphasized gossip, incorrectly, because he was trying to establish that the newspaper was an important institution in the transition of social life from tradition to modernity, from village to city, from "community" to "society." Thus he argued that "the work of the newspaper, as a gatherer and interpreter of the news, was but an extension of the function which was otherwise performed spontaneously by the community itself through the medium of personal contact and gossip." According to Park, the newspaper has the same function in modern society that gossip took in the traditional village. How well does it serve its function? Park's answer was foreordained by his governing Darwinian assumptions: "Humanly speaking, the present newspapers are about as good as they can be."

Park's essay is important because his self-consciousness about "natural history" makes explicit what would most probably be the standard explanation of the history of American journalism, if standard histories of journalism sought self-consciously to be explanatory. It is a "natural history" Lippmann offers in his stages of the growing independence of newspapers (or, as it might be better put, the changing character of the dependence of newspapers, which bowed first to government, then to parties, then to the public, and finally to the professionals). It is a natural history, often self-congratulatory or self-serving, seldom self-evident, that most histories of newspapers provide. The basic reference work is

Frank Luther Mott's *American Journalism*, an invaluable chronicle—but only a chronicle, characterized by what Mott calls his "sympathetic admiration" for American journalism and his conviction that "no generalization about it is safe."[62] (No generalization *is* safe, but we live by them and with them.)

Mott offers no overarching explanation of changes in American journalism. Where he does seek to explain pieces of the puzzle, he is brief and unconvincing. He lists four factors to account for the growth of newspaper circulation between 1833 and 1860. First, the population grew. Second, public education and increased literacy created "a nation of readers." Third, more democratic forms of government increased popular interest in public affairs. Finally, the reduction in newspaper prices made the press available to poorer people. But why, for instance, were newspaper prices reduced? Mott acknowledges only the technological improvements in presses and paper-making which made cheaper papers possible. Why did only the penny papers lower prices? Mott does not say. He identifies the penny press with the industrial revolution, but he is most laconic in defining what this means. He tells us only that "behind it all was the machine."[63]

In one respect, I will emulate Park's advice, if not his example. Park called for an account of the "conditions" that brought into being the newspaper as we know it. I will try to provide such an accounting. But to do so is not to write a natural history nor to write a history without explanation. The endeavor does not take inevitability for granted, nor does it assume that the important factors are unconnected to conscious human activity. On the contrary, the inadequacies of the arguments about technology and about literacy stem from their eagerness for technical solutions which bypass considerations of how individual and collective human choices are made. Constrained by social circumstances, people make

their own history and, sometimes, even unmake the conditions and conventions that guided them.

The Age of Egalitarianism and the Press

The 1830s are commonly known as the "Jacksonian era" or the age of "Jacksonian Democracy." A standard pocket history of the United States by Allen Nevins and Henry Steele Commager titles the chapter on this period "Jacksonian Democracy Sweeps In." The authors summarize Jackson's creed as "faith in the common man; belief in political equality; belief in equal economic opportunity; hatred of monopoly, special privilege, and the intricacies of capitalistic finance." They argue that Jackson's policies implemented this creed and that a democratic wave swept the country in the form of manhood suffrage, informal manners, a cheap press, public schooling, and the advance of the religious sects most democratic in their governance.[64]

For all the abuse this view has taken in the past decade or two, it does not seem to me to have been seriously tarnished. Rather than destroying the view of the 1830s as a democratic era, revisionist historians have just located the egalitarianism more precisely, not in the person or party of Jackson, but in a sharp democratization of both business and politics that transcended party. Revisionists have shown that long before Jackson, as Tocqueville and other European visitors observed, the United States was more democratic in politics and manners than European nations. They have shown, sometimes in excruciating detail, that wealth was not more evenly distributed in the 1830s than before—indeed, it appears that the contrary may be true.[65] Douglas Miller has even argued that

America had become progressively more democratic from 1789 to the 1820s and that the Jacksonian period reversed this development; the gentry declined, but a wealthy capitalist class replaced it so that visions of a classless society were belied in the very years in which they were most fervently discussed.[66]

But all this, it seems to me, far from being an attack on the idea that the 1830s were an egalitarian age, confirms just that hypothesis. Equality in the 1830s and 1840s meant the opening of careers to talent, the opening of opportunity to persons regardless of birth or breeding. *That* is what the age of Jackson celebrated. An even distribution of income had nothing to do with it. But more people acquired wealth and political power and brought with them a zeal for equal opportunity that led to the expansion of public education, the denial of government-granted monopolies to corporations and more flexible procedures for incorporating, the abolition of licensing regulations for doctors and lawyers, and other reforms we identify as "Jacksonian." It seems clear that in the United States, not unlike France and England in the same era, the angry shouts of "aristocracy" and "monopoly" came primarily from a growing urban middle class, while the epithets "anarchy" and "democracy" were hurled at this bourgeoisie by established mercantile elites. Contrary to Tocqueville and contrary to the implications of the revisionists, America did have to suffer a democratic revolution. It did so beginning in the years after 1815 and reaching a height in the 1830s and 1840s. In those decades the country was transformed from a liberal mercantilist republic, still cradled in aristocratic values, family, and deference, to an egalitarian market democracy, where money had new power, the individual new standing, and the pursuit of self-interest new honor. This is what Fenimore Cooper, on his return from Europe, had sensed and feared.

In the 1830s, established mercantile and financial leaders

in the cities were jostled by a newer, more numerous group of enterprising capitalists whose advance culminated symbolically, if not practically, in the assault on the United States Bank. There was not a sharp division between the old gentry and the new wealth; in New York, the center of the nation's economy, all came to meet at the common forum of the New York Stock Exchange. But the Exchange itself, founded in 1817 and not of much significance until the late 1820s, symbolized the new economic order.[67] A democratization of economic life was in progress.[68] By this I mean simply that more people were entering into a cash (and credit) nexus by becoming investors and by consuming goods produced outside the household and that their attitudes and ambitions were increasingly conditioned by this fact.

Economic development was promoted and shared by many rather than few. This is well illustrated in the financing of the railroads. Between 1830 and 1850, the miles of track rose from less than one hundred to nearly nine thousand. The rails were promoted by the large and small merchants of the chief seaport cities. When the Western Railroad in Massachusetts was financed in 1835, it had 2,800 individual stockholders, most of them owning from one to four hundred-dollar shares. The largest stockholder had just 200 shares and the 100 largest stockholders together held less than 40 percent of the stock.[69] What private capital came to the railroads before 1860, historian George Taylor observes, came from "a multitude of private savers, both large and small."[70]

After the War of 1812 and especially after the depression of 1818, investment shifted from shipping to manufacturing and transportation. Booming economic conditions in the South and West in the 1820s led to increased demand in those regions for the manufactured goods of the Northeast—textiles, leather products, clothes, shoes, and farm machinery. More and more products were included in the market; fewer things were made at home for home use. By 1830, the radical

shift from homemade to shop- and factory-made goods was well along, especially in the Northeast. Not only goods, like textiles, but also services were sold in the market. For instance, people turned from home care and home remedies to doctors and patent medicines for their health needs. Doctors could compete favorably with family care because the improvement of roads and the concentration of population in cities dramatically cut the cost of a physician's home visit.[71]

The penny papers themselves contributed directly to the extension of the market in two ways. First, they made advertisements more available to more people and so enlarged the potential market for manufactured goods. Second, they transformed the newspaper from something to be borrowed or read at a club or library to a product one bought for home consumption. Isaac Clark Pray observed that matches, which replaced the tin box and flint and steel, became popular about the same time as the penny press and had this same effect:

> The cheap matches and the cheap newspapers were sold in every street. Families before this, had borrowed coals of fire and newspapers of their richer neighbors. With the reduced prices, each family had a pride in keeping its own match-box, and in taking its favorite daily journal.[72]

The democratization of economic life brought with it attitudes that stressed economic gain to the exclusion of social aims; business practice more regularly began to reward strictly economic ties over broader ones. A poor boy from Connecticut who became a successful New York businessman, recalling this period, observed that New England boys did better than native New Yorkers in store, counting room, and office work. He gave two explanations:

> One is, they are not afraid to work, or to run errands, or do cheerfully what they are told to do. A second reason, they do their work quickly. A New York boy has many acquaintances—a New England boy has none, and is not called upon to stop and talk, when sent out by the merchant.[73]

The comment is instructive: socializing was coming to be seen as, and perhaps to some extent coming to be, a barrier to economic success, not its prerequisite.

The bourgeois revolution of the Jacksonian period was as visible in politics as in business. By the 1820s the party system of the early years of the Republic had collapsed. Though fourteen states had had relatively well-established two-party systems, by 1824 only five states still had elections contested in terms of the old party designations of Federalist and Republican. But a "second American party system" emerged between 1828 and 1840. It was not a continuation or revival of the earlier system. It was something quite new. For one thing, electoral regulations changed what politics meant. In 1800 only two states chose presidential electors by popular vote, but after 1832 only South Carolina did not. The property qualification for voting, boldly advocated by the likes of John Adams as late as 1820, died out. By 1840, in most states, universal white manhood suffrage was so widely supported that it was a political liability to have *ever* advocated anything else.[74]

Probably more important, party organization changed. Party machinery replaced the legislative caucus; formal organization supplanted the informality and avocational character of the old politics. This meant, among other things, that there was simply more political work to be done, and patronage and prestige attracted men from different social strata to do it. "For increasing numbers of men," Richard McCormick writes, "politics, or more specifically the operation of party machinery, was to become a vocation."[75] Indeed, Richard Hofstadter has for this reason offered Martin Van Buren, rather than Andrew Jackson, as the representative figure of Jacksonian Democracy. Van Buren was one of the "new breed" of political leaders. He and other members of New York's "Albany Regency" were prototypes of the new class of professional politicians. Van Buren, like two other members

of the Regency, was the son of a tavernkeeper; others in the group had grown up on farms, and few had formal education. Hofstadter describes them:

> They were, in short, modern political professionals who love the bonhomie of political gatherings, a coterie of more-or-less equals who relied for success not on the authority of a brilliant charismatic leader but on their solidarity, patience, and discipline. Their party gave them a creed, a vocation and a congenial social world all in one. It is hardly surprising that they should have developed a firm and self-conscious awareness of the imperatives of party organization, and have laid down a comprehensive set of canons for its management.[76]

These new professionals did not re-establish old parties run by personal cliques but invented new organizations, popularly based and democratically run.

The new parties were doctrinally, as well as institutionally, new. They shared more with one another than with either the Federalists or the Republicans of an earlier day.[77] In the 1830s both Whigs and Democrats subscribed to principles of political democracy that neither Federalists nor Republicans would have recognized. The meaning of politics, as well as the nature of politicians, had changed. Leadership in the past had been defined by "the problems and responsibilities of *general* development" in society, but leadership became "a task of representing a particular element of the system and attempting to secure its objectives through conflict and compromise with the other elements."[78] In other words, the old politics had focused on *what* was *right;* the new politics centered on *who* was *rightful,* who could amass the most units of private interest, rather than who could define the general interest.

In the old politics, the very idea of party was suspect. Party had been associated with everything particular, artificial, and selfish. Antiparty sentiment was identified with community,

tradition, and deference in politics. Antiparty feelings persisted into the 1830s, especially among the Whigs, but it was dying, and what Richard Hofstadter calls "the idea of a party system" was born. In the 1830s people began to identify—deeply—with political parties. Historian Ronald Formisano writes that it was in this period that "mass party loyalty as a stable basis came into being for the first time in American history."[79]

The democratization of business and politics in the 1830s suggests a framework for understanding the revolution in journalism in the same period. The social upheaval in America, like that in England in the same years, was characterized by a lot of rhetoric about "democracy," some working class agitation, and some socialist and unionizing efforts, but primarily it was a middle-class revolution. This is not to diminish it but to identify it. England's celebrated Reform Bill of 1832, both promoted and feared at the time as the ultimate democratization of the body politic, only modestly enlarged the voting population. But at the same time, the Reform Bill was the beginning of changes reaching far beyond the relative insignificance of its immediate practical achievement. The same was true in the United States. The Age of Egalitarianism in America was no special friend to the common person, the laborer, the immigrant. It was more the day of the skilled craftsmen, the small and large merchants, the small and large tradesmen who were able to move up in the worlds of politics and business and transform those worlds. Here, too, the entering wedge of a commercial middle class brought with it new institutions and a new consciousness that would radically affect every stratum of society.

This framework for understanding the 1830s helps explain and is itself illuminated by the penny press. The founding of the penny papers is evidence of the new kind of entrepreneur and the new type of enterprise the 1830s encouraged. The

qualities contemporaries admired or detested in these papers—relative independence from party, low price, high circulation, emphasis on news, timeliness, sensation—have to do with the rise of an urban middle class. The nature of the connection between the middle class and the new journalism can be appreciated by looking more closely at the most important of the penny papers, the *New York Herald.*

The Social Standing of the Penny Press

James Gordon Bennett was born in Scotland in 1795, a Catholic on Calvinist soil. At the age of twenty-four he emigrated to Halifax. After teaching school, clerking, and proofreading in Halifax, in Addison, Maine, in Boston, and in New York, he got his first serious newspaper experience on the *Charleston Courier* in 1822. A year later he was back in New York, writing for various journals. In 1827 and 1828 he served James Watson Webb's *New York Enquirer* as a Washington correspondent, during which time he enlivened Washington reporting, making newspaper discourse less a simple record of events and more a news "story." Bennett worked for Webb until 1832, after which he tried to set up a paper of his own. In 1835, with five hundred dollars, a few months shy of his fortieth birthday, he began the *New York Herald.* He remained its editor until his death in 1872.

There is no question that Bennett was the most original figure in American journalism, at least until Joseph Pulitzer. Nor is there any doubt that the *Herald* was the most important and widely read American newspaper in the decades before the Civil War. When Bennett died, Samuel Bowles, editor of the *Springfield Republican,* wrote an appraisal of Bennett and the *Herald* which judiciously sums up the consensus:

> He was a coarse and vigorous writer, but excelled more in organization and enterprise. He was never troubled with principles, or accustomed to espouse and defend a cause from any far-sighted conviction, or faith in the nobler springs of human action.
>
> The character of the man has been reflected by his works. Under him, the Herald was the first of American papers, indeed, the first journal in the world, to apprehend the truth that the collection of news at any price was the first duty of journalism. This was the conviction and the faith which served Mr. Bennett in place of every other. The Herald, though fickle in politics and worthless in editorial judgment, thus became the symbol of newspaper enterprise all over the world. . . . we must not deny to Mr. Bennett his place in journalism, as the great teacher and enforcer of the principle that in devotion to news-gathering lies at once the first duty and chief profit of a newspaper. Though other papers have in more recent years excelled the Herald in this respect, the first enunciation and demonstration of the principle will be yielded by history and popular tradition to Mr. Bennett.[80]

What made the *Herald* so successful? Why was it the American paper most widely read in Europe? Who were the people who read it and why?

While we can safely assume from the low price of the penny papers and their large circulation that many more low- and middle-income persons bought the penny papers than purchased the six-penny sheets, we cannot assume that wealthy people did *not* read the penny papers. In fact, it may be that "new money"—the people investing in stocks and yearning for respectability—was very attracted to the penny papers, especially to the *Herald.* Like other penny editors, Bennett sought a wide readership for his paper, but he repeatedly tried to distinguish its editorial course, not only from the six-penny papers, but from the other penny sheets, as in this comment on May 20, 1835:

> The small daily papers around us were solely directed to mere police reports, melancholy accidents, or curious extracts. They indicated no mind, no intelligence, no knowledge of society at large. The larger [papers] were many of them without talent and without

interest. There was plenty of room, therefore, for a cheap paper managed on our plan, calculated to circulate among all ranks and conditions; to interest the merchant and man of learning, as well as the mechanic and the man of labor.[81]

A year later Bennett distinguished the *Herald* from the six-penny papers, arguing that this "Wall Street press" was at the mercy of powerful interests: "The banks and corrupt *cliques* of men control them altogether."[82] On the other hand, he distinguished the *Herald* from his penny brethren. In boasting of the *Herald's* circulation—10,000 at the time—he compared it only to the Wall Street press, the largest representative of which was the *Courier and Enquirer* with a circulation of 6,400. He justified excluding the penny papers from tabulation with disparaging remarks about the fluctuations in their circulation:

For instance, the Sun publishes, probably, about 15,000, but great quantities are never read, and indeed the proprietors find it as profitable to sell their paper for wrapping up tea and enveloping hog's lard, as for any other purpose.[83]

The penny press, he wrote, loses half its circulation in winter when the loafers who make up such a large part of its readership are not on the street. He criticized the penny papers for having no talent, no knowledge of business, and no acquaintance with society.[84]

Bennett sought a middle road for the *Herald*—more serious and responsible than the penny press, more lively and enterprising than the Wall Street papers. The middle road was marked when Bennett raised the price of the *Herald* to two cents on August 19, 1836. Nine months later Bennett indicated the direction he hoped the *Herald* would take when he announced the publication of the *Evening Chronicle,* an evening version of the *Herald:*

The extraordinary increase in popularity of the Herald as a commercial, business, and general newspaper of the highest rank,

have necessarily crowded out of its columns a great deal of local and amusing matter which is interesting to the public at large.[85]

For this reason, he went on, the *Chronicle* would be published to take up the slack.[86] This tends to indicate that the *Herald* itself was appealing to the practical needs and somewhat refined tastes of a well-to-do segment of the city's population. In the same issue that published a rather scholarly "History of Banking" over the first three columns of page one, Bennett editorialized on his own independence and intelligence, again distinguishing himself from the six-pennies, while courting the readership of those with money to invest. Bennett was proud that the *Herald* appealed to the wealthy classes:

No newspaper establishment, in this or any other country, has ever attained so extensive a circulation, or is read by so many of the business, educated, and intelligent classes.[87]

The readership Bennett sought, his contemporary biographer claims he attained. Isaac Pray wrote that by 1839 the *Herald,* with a circulation equal to the *London Times,* was "respected for its valuable statistics and thoughts by commercial men and statesmen, while its idiosyncrasies in literature and in social life kept it, in spite of the most determined opposition, under the eye of the fashionable and of the middling classes." He also observed that the money article, Bennett's innovation and special pet, "is the most important department of a public press, but only one journal in ten seems to be aware of the importance of making it independent, searching, and impartial."[88]

The "money article" deserves special attention. In the money article, a daily feature of the *Herald* from its inception, Bennett did for financial reporting what he had done years before for the coverage of Washington politics—he turned the recording of facts into the analysis of the shape of events. As Bennett put it:

> The spirit, pith, and philosophy of commercial affairs is what men of business want. Dull records of facts, without condensation, analysis, or deduction, are utterly useless. The philosophy of commerce is what we aim at, combined with accuracy, brevity, and spirit.[89]

Reporting the "mere details" of the markets was not enough, Bennett wrote on another occasion; only an account of "broad leading features" is of general interest to merchants.[90]

Bennett missed no opportunity to crow about the popularity of his money article: "I have struck out the true Baconian path in commercial science, and it must succeed."[91] In January, 1837, he quoted the *New Orleans American* as saying that the money reports of the *Herald* were "comprehensive" and would be published for *American* readers. Other commercial papers in almost every large city, Bennett claimed, felt the same way. "We have every reason to believe that the Wall Street Reports of the Herald are beginning a new era of commercial intelligence and commercial science."[92] When Bennett announced circulation gains, he frequently would attribute them to the quality of his commercial reporting and the attraction of his paper for the business classes.[93]

There is good reason to believe that Bennett's boasts were well-founded. Even Bennett's enemies acknowledged the popularity of the money article. In 1840 the *Commercial Advertiser* attacked the *Albany Argus* for defending the reputation of the *Herald,* and it reprinted the *Argus* piece it criticized. The *Argus* wrote that it would not defend nine-tenths of the content of the *Herald,* but it felt otherwise about the money article:

> We are aware that a thousand motives operate on those who buy the Herald to read, but we venture to say that nearly all its regular subscribers take the paper for these articles.[94]

The money articles, the *Argus* said, had given the *Herald* influence with American property holders and capitalists at home and abroad. The *Commercial Advertiser* did not deny it.

There is another kind of evidence to indicate that Bennett gained the new middle-class readership he was seeking. This lies in the fact that the Wall Street papers singled out Bennett for attack rather than assaulting all of the cheap papers. Further, their attacks apparently had some success in reducing the *Herald's* circulation. Whatever may have been the case with the other penny papers, the *Herald* appealed to an expanded and expanding class of people who emulated the respectability the Wall Street papers stood for and were influenced by their claims of the disrepute of the *Herald.* By Bennett's own report, his daily circulation, two years after the Wall Street papers began their "Moral War" in 1840, was just 14,460, down from 17,000. Not until 1844 did the *Herald* recover its earlier popularity.

The "Moral War" was a campaign of the six-penny papers to put the *Herald* out of business. Supported by some papers in Boston and Philadelphia, New York's leading six-penny papers charged Bennett with indecency, blasphemy, blackmail, lying, and libel. The *Journal of Commerce,* the *Commercial Advertiser,* and the *Courier and Enquirer* all proclaimed that they were abandoning the policy of not mentioning the *Herald* in their columns and began to attack Bennett directly, either in their own editorials or in reprinting anti-*Herald* pieces from other papers. Advertisers in the *Herald* were threatened. The *Courier and Enquirer* said that New York editors had made an agreement not to take ads for places of public amusement which continued to advertise in the *Herald.*[95] It wrote that gentlemen would not buy newspapers from newsboys who also sold the *Herald*—this apparently was both a report and a recommendation.[96] The *Herald* was declared off-limits to self-respecting men and women, which suggests that the self-respecting men and women the established papers courted had been reading the *Herald.* Hotels, reading rooms, and clubs were cajoled into excluding Bennett's "dirty sheet," thereby indicating that the *Herald* had

found its way into hotels, reading rooms, and clubs patronized by the well-to-do.[97]

The "Moral War" of New York journalism has the earmarks of other moral wars of the same period. These crusades were the shields of an old elite jousting with a rising middle class. The temperance movement in the 1820s, for instance, has been described as "the reaction of the old Federalist aristocracy to loss of political, social, and religious dominance in American society."[98] Something similar could be said of the early abolitionist movement. Of 106 leaders in the movement who had become abolitionists before 1840, *all* came from Federalist families, according to David Donald's research. Their fathers had been preachers, doctors, or teachers, a few merchants, a few manufacturers. All but one of the sons were anti-Jacksonians. The abolitionists were men displaced in a new world. They were not hostile to labor but indifferent to it; what they objected to was a society increasingly dependent on trade and manufacturing and the ethics of the marketplace. They did not question capitalism or private property, but they objected to "the transfer of leadership to the wrong groups in society," and they took to abolitionism to assert some moral authority over the commercial middle class. "Basically," Donald concludes, "abolitionism should be considered the anguished protest of an aggrieved class against a world they never made."[99]

William Charvat makes a similar argument about the romantic movement in American literature in the 1830s and 1840s. Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau paid almost no attention to the depression that lasted from 1837 to 1842, closing nine-tenths of American factories in its first six months. Of course, New England was the area of the country least affected by the depression, and these were New England writers. But probably more important, the income of these writers was relatively steady. They believed the reckless speculation of the commercial middle class brought on the bad

times. They loathed and feared the bourgeoisie, not the poor: "The whole romantic movement in America," Charvat concludes, "may be considered in part as a protest against the new bourgeoisie."[100]

In this context, it is clear that the "Moral War" on the *New York Herald,* while a matter of business competition, was not simply that. Why should competition take this peculiar form? Why didn't the six-penny papers lower their prices, increase their reporting of news, expand their coverage of the stock market, make their writing more lively, change their mode of distribution, and take advantage of their ties to the business community to increase advertising revenue? Some of them, in time, did do many of these things. But their first response came not as a matter of shrewd calculation in a competitive market. The six-penny editors did not understand their roles or responsibilities in narrowly economic terms. Their moral wars were not so much business competition as deadly serious social conflict, a class conflict in which they were on the defensive against a new way of being in the world which we awkwardly summarize as "middle class" and which was symbolized and strengthened by the rise of the penny press.

Conclusion

Modern journalism, which is customarily and appropriately traced to the penny papers, had its origins in the emergence of a democratic market society. What "democratic market society" means has already been indicated, but needs to be restated and amplified. By "democratic," I refer to the replacement of a political culture of gentry rule by the ideal and the institutional fact of mass democracy. After the 1830s,

the assumption that one had to have a propertied stake in society to be a reliable voter and that an elect, rather than an electorate, should govern could no longer be maintained. Indeed, it could not even be voiced with impunity. As I have indicated, the beginnings of the modern American system of bureaucratic, non-ideological parties can be traced to the Jacksonian democratization of politics.

But "democratization" was not solely political either in its causes or consequences. The growth of a market economy in the 1820s and 1830s integrated and rationalized American economic life—but it did more than this. Not only did more people and a greater range of goods participate in the marketplace, but a culture of the market became a more pervasive feature of human consciousness. And this culture, it is fair to say, was democratic. In the market there were no special categories and privileges. Land could be bought and sold, and even human labor had a price set by supply and demand, not by custom. In the market, one individual was as good as the next; in the ideology of the marketplace, all individuals acting separately to promote their own advantage would produce the greatest possible aggregate wealth for society as a whole. It became more acceptable to think of "self-interest" as the mainspring of human behavior and, indeed, in the theory of the market, as a motive to be admired, not distrusted.

The word "society" in the phrase "democratic market society" is probably the most difficult to pin down. "Society" is not only a general term referring to any human social organization but an historical ideal type characterizing the modern social order. It is distinguished from "community." Only in the nineteenth century did this distinction become a prominent theme in politics and in social thought.[101] And no wonder: there was little we could identify as "society" before then. "Community" in the nineteenth century came to mean the old world of face-to-face human ties—of family, kinship,

neighborhood, and social circle. As the nineteenth century viewed it, "community" was the world of the Brueghel paintings of peasants—a group of people which, at work or at play, was at one with itself. In contrast, "society" was the rather grim world of the city, the stranger, and the individual. As sociologist Louis Wirth described it in a classic essay on "Urbanism as a Way of Life," urban living involved "the substitution of secondary for primary contacts, the weakening of bonds of kinship, and the declining social significance of the family, the disappearance of the neighborhood, and the undermining of the traditional basis of social solidarity." [102]

The differences between community and society, rural life and urban, tradition and modernity, agricultural and industrial worlds have been exaggerated, and dependence on these terms as theoretical constructs has sometimes been misleading.[103] Nevertheless, with the movement from country to city, from self-sufficent family economies to market-based commercial and manufacturing economies, people came unstuck from the cake of custom, found chances to form individual personalities, and faced new possibilities of impersonality in the social relations of modern life. Human ties, once conferred by family and residence, became more subject to choice. Nowhere was this more true than in the United States, which all of Europe recognized in the 1830s as the leading experiment in untraditional social organization, politics, and culture. And nowhere was the American world more novel than in the cities of the Eastern seaboard—Boston, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and, most of all, New York. A city, as Richard Sennett has concisely defined it, is "a human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet." [104] This was the problem and the hope of the cities; this was the meaning of the "society" coming into being. At the same time that people became free to feel themselves as new and important beings, they also came to feel the weight of social relationships and social institutions—society took on an existence objectified

outside the person. On the one hand, living became more of a spectacle of watching strangers in the streets, reading about them in the newspapers, dealing with them in shops and factories and offices. On the other hand, as people understood their own ordinary lives to be of value and of possible interest to others, they both sought strangers as audiences or publics and avoided them to protect a private space for the self.[105]

This was the world in which modern journalism took root. There were rural papers, hundreds of them, but the papers which set the standard for journalism then and passed on their legacy to the present were urban. There were party papers, there were socialist papers and labor papers, there were business papers, but, again, the papers to which modern journalism clearly traces its roots were the middle-class penny papers. These papers, whatever their political preferences, were spokesmen for egalitarian ideals in politics, economic life, and social life through their organization of sales, their solicitation of advertising, their emphasis on news, their catering to large audiences, their decreasing concern with the editorial.

The penny papers expressed and built the culture of a democratic market society, a culture which had no place for social or intellectual deference. This was the groundwork on which a belief in facts and a distrust of the reality, or objectivity, of "values" could thrive. But in 1840 or 1850 or 1860, American journalism did not yet have clearly articulated common ideas and ideals. American journalism had not yet become an occuptional group or an industry. It would be both by the end of the nineteenth century, by which time one can identify the emergence and differentiation of professional ideals in journalism.

CHAPTER 2

TELLING STORIES: JOURNALISM AS A VOCATION AFTER 1880

IN DECEMBER, 1896, William Randolph Hearst, a newcomer to New York journalism who had recently become owner and editor of the *New York Journal,* sent Richard Harding Davis and Frederic Remington to Havana to cover the conflict there between Spanish authorities and Cuban insurgents. Remington was a thirty-five-year-old artist whose drawings appeared frequently in newspapers and popular magazines. Davis, at thirty-two, was already a popular culture hero through his reporting, his fiction, and his stylish manner. Hearst offered him $3,000 for a month of reporting from Cuba; Davis counted as well on $600 from *Harper's* for an article on his travels, and he had promises that his dispatches would be collected with Remington's drawings and published in book form.

Like other reporters in Cuba, Davis and Remington were barred from the "war zone" by Spanish military authorities. News was hard to get. Rumors and minor incidents were generally the best the correspondents had to offer. This so discouraged Remington that he wired Hearst: "Everything is quiet. There is no trouble here. There will be no war. Wish