

NEWSLETTERS, NEWSPAPERS, PAMPHLETS

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Summary

This paper outlines the development of newsletters, newspapers, and pamphlets as news media. Newsletters are both the oldest and the newest print news medium. Originating in both Rome (around 59 BC) and China (during the T'ang dynasty, 618–907 AD), these handwritten reports kept literate adults informed on the happenings in the city and the empire. Although such news reports faltered following the fall of the Roman Empire, script newsletters resurfaced with the rise of the state structure in the West. For centuries, these handwritten newsletters were the dominant print news medium. The circulations were small because of the labor-intensive nature of their production. After the advent of newspapers in the West in the early seventeenth century, newsletters continued to be published but eventually newspapers became the dominant news medium. Newsletters are also the newest print medium. Reintroduced as a distinct news medium in the twentieth century, newsletters seemed tailor-made for the specialized information needs of readers in developed countries.

Newspapers did not debut in an environment of freedom. Early printed newspapers were closely controlled through censorship, licensing, and prior restraint by governments. Accordingly, most were usually little more than mouthpieces for the government. Newspapers also represented an important tool in the colonization movement: they reinforced ties between the mother country and the colonies. Eventually, as licensing and sedition laws broke down, more newspapers, especially in the West, assumed a role as critic of the government.

The nineteenth century represented a time of great change for newspapers, enforced by technological, social, economic, and political conditions. By the end of the century, newspaper content had changed and expanded to appeal to a mass audience. Circulation had increased; distribution had changed, and subscription prices had come down. Newspapers had become big business throughout much of the developed world.

The twentieth century has not been as kind to newspapers. The century has brought new competition, first the radio, then television, and finally the Internet. Newspapers have been losing their share of advertising revenue. More and more newspapers in the developed countries have folded, unable to clear substantial enough profits for the corporations that own them. The brightest part of the newspaper picture may be the Internet. Major metropolitan dailies are going online with their editorial content.

1. Introduction

The history of newsletters, newspapers, and pamphlets has not been the property of one culture or one country. Many cultures, many races, many generations have molded newsletters, newspapers, and pamphlets. Some of those contributions have been technological, others philosophical. Some changed the editorial content of the media; others directly affected the advertising side. Some were fostered by political, social, and economic conditions within the countries; others were triggered by the creativity of individuals. All, however, help explain the rich diversity in the newspaper and newsletter industries today. They also explain the content of today's newspapers and newsletters—both print and digital.

2. Newsletters

Although newspapers are popularly represented as the “oldest” of the news media, that is not the case. If a news medium must be dubbed the “oldest,” then clearly that title needs to go to the newsletter. Centuries before the newspaper made its appearance, handwritten newsletters spread the news of the day.

2.1. Earliest Newsletters

The history of modern journalism dates back to at least ancient Rome. The city had all the ingredients for launching a modern media system—a high degree of literacy among the affluent and a potential readership with a keen interest in current affairs and enough leisure time to read. The *Acta Diurna Populi Romani* (Daily Acts of the Roman People) was a script account of the news of the empire. Launched in 59 BC by Julius Caesar as an official publication of his government, *Acta Diurna* drew on a newsgathering

heritage that had developed over the centuries. These influences included *Acta Senatus* (the deliberations of the Roman Senate which dated to 449 BC); the album (accounts of ceremonies by the rulers); and the newsletters (published by paid scribes).

Acta Diurna provided the details of government business—decrees, proclamations and resolutions, news of the rich and famous, catastrophe stories (fires and executions), and the weather. Because *Acta Diurna* was handwritten, it had a limited circulation. However, it had a substantial readership (for ancient Rome) because it was posted in many of the popular places of the day, including the bathhouses. The *Acta* also tied into the oral tradition, and it was read aloud in public places so that even the illiterate could be kept abreast of happenings within the empire. *Acta Diurna* survived two centuries and evolved over that time from providing primarily official news to more popular fare, including news of crime, divorce, marriage, and gossip. Although no copies of the *Acta Diurna* have survived, much is known of its content because of references in the literature and the histories of the day.

The Roman emperor Augustus strengthened the foundation for a media system in the West by establishing a postal system that linked the Roman Empire. Not only were official dispatches delivered to the governors in the various provinces, but books were also delivered over this postal system.

The Roman postal system, however, was not the first. Across the world, another, independent newsgathering tradition was developing. China had a long written tradition and was a center of technological innovation. One invention in particular aided the newsletter's (and all of the print media's) development in the East and the West. In 105 AD, paper was developed in China. However, even before this invention, during the Han dynasty, the imperial court of China developed its own information delivery system by setting up a postal system throughout the expansive Chinese empire. Organized in 206 BC, the postal system was set up to inform the imperial court of happenings within the empire. By the T'ang dynasty (618–907 AD), the Chinese version of an official news organ, *ti-pao*, was circulating to government officials. The circulation of the *ti-pao* expanded to include intellectuals during the Sung dynasty (960–1268) and other citizens during the Ming dynasty (1376–1644).

Thus, newsgathering, news dissemination, and newsletters were not peculiar to the West. News activities in both Rome and China were triggered by similar informational needs and desires; both had strong central governments with far-flung empires. In order to rule effectively, both governments needed information that was available only through an efficient postal system. Therefore, each empire created its own version. Each government developed its own handwritten news organs (*Acta Diurna* in Rome and *ti-pao* in China) as a method of communicating with its educated elite. The Chinese, however, were able to retain control of the information source longer than the Romans.

2.2. Decline of Newsletters in the West

In the fourth and fifth centuries, the Roman Empire—which incorporated much of Europe—dissolved. Trade and transportation degenerated, literacy declined, and written news sheets disappeared.

Script newsheets only reemerged by the fourteenth century, with the development of a written native language in the emerging European states, the need for information brought on by the reinstatement of widespread trade, and the relative affluence of literate individuals. These early newsletters appeared in Venice, Rome, and other major cities in Europe.

2.3. Spread of Newsletters in Europe

The newsletters of this period varied considerably. Some, like the German *Schanbriefe*, were little more than espionage sheets. Others had propaganda purposes, designed to cover a specific event from a particular perspective, such as the Genoa civil war or the revolt in Naples. Politics was the fodder of the editorial columns of most of these newsletters. Concepts that are commonly identified with journalism today, such as objectivity, fairness, and accuracy, were not necessarily values shared by the writers of these newsletters.

Specifics with regard to these early newsletters are hard to obtain. No doubt their circulations were small, especially in the light of the labor-intensive nature of script production. The small circulation numbers, however, would be misleading, because newsletters tended to combine the oral and the written traditions. Many were designed to be read aloud to the illiterate. States attempted to control these newsletters. However, according to historians, no means of control worked effectively. Threats of capital punishment, exile, and harassment could not and did not rid Europe and the city-states of the newsletters. The bigger threat to newsletters, it turned out, would be the newspaper produced by the printing press employing the new movable type innovations. For a time, the script newsletter and the printed newspaper lived in a kind of uneasy coexistence, but eventually the printed newspaper became the dominant medium.

Another medium would also develop as a result of this new printing technology. Fostered by the social and religious changes that were spreading through Europe at the time, the pamphlet came to represent yet another medium for the transmission of news and opinion.

From the perspective of the central governments of the emerging state system of Europe, the printing technology would be a boon, because it was far easier to control through licensing and prior restraint than the copyists working on newsletters in secret.

3. Printing and the Rise of Newspapers and Pamphlets

The mechanical process that led to the development of the newspaper—at least in Europe—was Johannes Gutenberg's movable type innovation. Gutenberg developed movable type techniques in Germany in the middle of the fifteenth century. The technology spread quickly throughout Europe. By 1480, 110 towns in Western Europe had printing presses; by 1500, that number had grown to 236.

Europe had been relatively slow in developing movable type technology. By 1045, a metal worker in China, Pi Sheng, had invented a press using movable letters made of metal, clay, and wood. The movable type technology dates back even earlier to the

ancient Minoan civilization in Crete in about 1700 BC to 1600 BC. All these cultures, however, had developed this printing system independently.

Once Gutenberg introduced the movable type technology in Europe, many innovations that made printing cheaper, faster, and more efficient followed in the West in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Printing did have an unexpected side effect; central governments soon discovered that printing was a technology that was relatively easy to control. Throughout Western Europe, licensing, prior restraint, and censorship of printing were the standards of the day. Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, printers and journalists convicted of sedition, heresy, and treason were subject to death in Spain, France, Austria, Britain, Germany, and Switzerland.

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Biographical Sketch

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