

## HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATIONS

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### Summary

Mass communications history is fairly short, although the various forms of mass media that have developed over the years have made a tremendous impression on the technological, political, economic, social and cultural trends of every nation. Mass communications, defined as communication reaching large numbers of people, primarily developed in just the last 500 years. Earlier developments, along with technological advances and social change, helped spark the demand and innovation necessary for creating today's mass media.

Books are the oldest of the media, with the first known book written in Egypt around 1400 B.C. Books were not reproduced for the masses, however, until the invention of the printing press in 1456. Newspapers are otherwise considered to be the oldest mass medium. News-sheets appeared as early as 100 B.C. in Rome, and as political tracts and pamphlets roughly 400 to 500 years ago. Nonetheless, the first regular newspapers did not debut until the 1600s. Magazine development was also slow. Derived from the French word "magasin", the first English magazine did not appear until 1704.

The electronic media developed more quickly. Radio emerged as a mass medium in the 1920s, thanks to the growing popularity of mass entertainment and technological advances stemming from the development of the telegraph, telephone and the wireless. A worldwide race to add pictures then ensued, with the creation of television considered to be one of the most important inventions of the twentieth century. Television hit its stride in the 1940s, followed by cable television and satellite communications in the latter half of the century. The newest mass medium is the Internet, which has revolutionized communications. Over the years, each new medium has emerged to supplement and compete with the traditional media. Trends have included specialization, globalization, consolidation and convergence.

## **1. Introduction**

The history of mass communications is relatively short in the scope of world history. Although news-sheets appeared as early as 100 B.C., most forms of communication reaching large numbers of people have developed only in the last 500 years. As nations moved from agrarian- to industrial-based societies, tremendous social changes influenced the development of mass media. During the Industrial Revolution, advances in education and transportation, as well as increases in leisure time and urbanization, helped spur reader demand and hence the growth of newspapers, books and magazines. As the public's appetite for information and entertainment grew, technological innovations paved the way for the creation of the electronic mass media of the twentieth century. Satellite communications and the Internet are now among the products of today's Information Age, sparked by the demand for even more channels of communication that are faster, clearer and farther-reaching.

From the simple, crude printing techniques of yesteryear to today's sophisticated digital communications that canvas the globe, the mass media have continually evolved and adapted to changing demands and technological opportunities. Over the years, a greater variety of mass media has appeared, combining new and old forms of technology and content. In some cases, the media have become more global, local, interactive and personal. In general, the media have also grown more specialized, competitive and consolidated.

Throughout their short history, the mass media have had a tremendous impact on the political, social, economic and cultural trends of every country. The media have been credited with such advances as the rise in literacy and the distribution of the arts, while shaping political systems and promoting democracy. Mass media advertising has become a vital element of the capitalist economic system. And societies have come

together thanks to the expanding reach of modern communications. On the other hand, governments in most nations have, at some point, exerted various levels of control over the media. The mass media have been blamed for misleading consumers, voters and children with political propaganda and advertising, while encouraging violence, indecency, and an erosion of cultural values.

The following sections trace the development of the various mass media, starting with books, newspapers and magazines as the oldest mass media. The twentieth century media of radio and television are then chronicled, followed by the history of newer media, such as cable television, satellite communications and the Internet. The technological, political, economic, cultural and social impacts of each medium are addressed.

## **2. Books**

Books are the oldest of the media, having been around since the beginning of written language. As far back as 2400 B.C. in Babylonia, tiny clay tablets were inscribed with cuneiform characters to record legal decisions and monetary transactions. By 700 B.C., a library of literary works written on clay tablets existed in Asia Minor.

Various forms of paper were developed over the centuries, with the first, papyrus, appearing in Egypt as early as 4000 B.C. Papyrus was made from the pith of a reed found in Egypt. The first known book was "The Book of the Dead", written in Egypt around 1400 B.C. Animal skins were later used, leading to the development of parchment, which became the primary medium for writing until the tenth century A.D. At that time, linen was introduced.

The earliest form of bookbinding consisted of a stick with rolls of long pieces of papyrus or parchment wound around it. Scrolls eventually gave way to a form of binding called "codex", developed by the Romans in the fourth century A.D. Here the paper was cut into sheets and tied together on the left side between two boards. Like books today, this allowed readers to leaf through pages, and for authors to structure the material, creating such things as an index and table of contents. This ability to organize information made books extremely valuable.

Nonetheless, books were hardly considered a mass medium because very few copies existed. Until the middle of the fifteenth century, most books were hand-copied, oftentimes by monks. Such books were expensive and very few people could read or write. As a result, only religious orders, the ruling elite, and some wealthy merchants ever saw or owned one.

The concept of making prints of books was not new, however; the Chinese developed the technique in the ninth century using woodblocks. The oldest known printed book, called "The Diamond Sutra", was a 16-foot scroll printed in China in 868. Still, the Chinese did not do much more with this crude invention, and similar techniques did not appear in Western Europe until the early fifteenth century.

## 2.1. The Printing Press

Probably the most important milestone in the development of mass communication came in 1456 with the invention of the printing press and movable type. In Mainz, Germany, Johannes Gutenberg paved the way for the reproduction of books for the masses by creating a usable printing system consisting of a simple set of metal characters. The Bible was one of the first books printed. Encouraged by a public eager for knowledge, the art of printing spread rapidly throughout Europe. Within 50 years, more than 30 thousand different books were printed, primarily religious and Latin classics.

The invention of the printing press had a considerable impact on civilization (see *Popular Culture*). Eventually, more popular subjects such as history, travel and romance appeared, written in native languages and traded on the open market. Where royalty and the church had previously controlled information, the mass production of books now created a marketplace for ideas. Circulation threatened the power of the church and state because knowledge could be a powerful tool and weapon. Nearly all governments and societies at one time or another sought to restrict the printing or distribution of books. A license to print was required in England from 1529 to 1695, although many prohibited books were still sold on the black market. Copyright protection for printers also became a concern, with England enacting the first copyright statute in 1518 (see *Telecommunications Policy*).

In North America, the first book published was "The Whole Book of Psalms" in 1640 by Stephen Daye. One of the most famous books was "Poor Richard's Almanac", published by Benjamin Franklin every year from 1733 to 1758. Franklin established the first subscription library in America in 1731. The elite mostly possessed their own private collections. Thomas Jefferson's personal library was eventually purchased by Congress in 1815 to start the Library of Congress.

For many years, the process of printing books changed little and production was generally slow. Only about 10 percent of the population could read, and books remained fairly expensive (see *Culture of Consumption*). But as literacy increased, more efficient techniques emerged to meet demand. In 1798 in France, a machine that could handle a continuous roll of paper was developed. Steam power was added in 1811 in Germany, and an American invented a rotary press in 1846. Type had to be hand set until the linotype was created in 1884 in the U.S.

Faster printing methods and inexpensive paper led to cheaply produced books called "dime novels". Beginning in the 1870s, these popular, short novels sold for about 10 cents and covered such themes as adventure, romance, and the American frontier. Horatio Alger became famous for his 120 books about rags-to-riches success stories. The dime novel was the forerunner of today's paperback book. The concept of a "best seller" also emerged in the U.S. in the 1850s with the widely sold "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (see *Popular Culture*) (see *Culture of Consumption*).

## 2.2. Competition and Consolidation

As book publishing entered the twentieth century, there were many changes. Competition and increasing costs led to the decline of the dime novel, and companies began consolidating. Soon, the industry began experiencing considerable growth. By 1914 in the U.S., cheaper parcel post mailing rates for books promoted distribution. Book clubs emerged in the 1920s, revitalizing the industry by ensuring sales (see *Culture of Consumption*). Europeans were the first to publish cheaply bound paperback books, which became a hit during WWII. The growth in education was a boon to the production of textbooks, which today amounts to more than one-third of the total gross sales of books.

The latter half of the twentieth century saw greater specialization. More scientific and technical books appeared, along with "how-to" books and psychology books. The romance market took off in the 1960s. In the 1970s, the streamlined "managed" or "instant" book appeared where publishers initiated and put together books quickly, based on timely topics and sales projections (see *Popular Culture*).

Industry consolidation continued as more conglomerates swallowed up smaller, independent book publishers. One result was the production of media packages of books, movies and television programs. The industry also saw the decline of the family-owned bookstore and the rise of profitable book superstores with comfortable coffee shop atmospheres.

With the advent of the electronic media and the Internet, it might seem that books would have faded from the scene. But book production has only increased. Roughly 50,000 new titles are published every year, with about 700,000 other titles still in print. Bookseller Amazon.com is among the most successful online companies. A return to fantasy themes with the "Harry Potter" book series also reinvigorated traditional book reading among youth at a time when more are fixated on computer and television screens (see *Popular Culture*). Books are still the most convenient and most permanent way of packaging information for efficient storage, quick retrieval and individual consumption. Consumers still cite books as one of the best values for their entertainment money.

## 3. Newspapers

While the book is the oldest medium, credit for the oldest mass medium goes to the newspaper (see *Newspapers, Newsletters and Pamphlets*). Newspapers were the first to reach a mass audience, ultimately serving all classes and becoming a medium of democracy.

News-sheets and reports published by various governments are among the first known examples of publications giving rise to the modern newspaper. As early as 100 B.C., the Roman government published a news-sheet known as the "Acta Diurna", or "daily actions". Beginning in the seventh century, the Tang dynasty of China block-printed a "palace report".

While these early publications were produced by secular and ecclesiastical authorities, later news publications appearing in Europe were not. Newspapers in Europe began as political tracts and pamphlets roughly 400 to 500 years ago. Eventually, newsletters and news-sheets called "corantos" (current) appeared in Europe. Unlike true newspapers, these materials were not issued on a regular basis and rarely carried a title or author's name.

Despite the invention of movable type in 1450, more than 150 years passed before regular newspapers appeared in Europe. One of the first early European newspapers was the "Nieuwe Tidingen", published in Antwerp, Belgium around 1605. Others appeared in the Netherlands and Germany, typically carrying information about business and war. A weekly coranto appeared in London by 1621, becoming the first English prototype newspaper. Beginning in 1665, the "Oxford Gazette" appeared twice weekly, becoming the first true English-language newspaper in form and style. A daily newspaper called the "Daily Courant" appeared in 1702.

### **3.1. Control and Demand**

Newspaper development was generally slow because of strict controls in countries such as England. Henry VIII feared the power of the press, and by 1534 he instituted measures to control printing, including licensing. For more than 100 years, unauthorized publications and words critical of the Crown resulted in imprisonment and even death. The licensing requirement was not lifted until 1694. Nonetheless, in some countries such as Germany, authority was weaker and newspapers were able to develop more quickly.

In America, newspaper development was quite slow. Little demand existed because newspapers from England were readily available, the population was small and largely illiterate, and transportation was difficult. Barter in lieu of cash also made advertising difficult. Moreover, colonists, still under British rule, lacked full citizenship and did not enjoy press freedom. The first newspaper in America, published in 1690, only lasted one issue. "Publik Occurrences, Both Foreign and Domestick" was printed by Benjamin Harris who lacked the requisite license from the British Crown. It was not until 14 years later in 1704, with authority from the Massachusetts governor, that a handwritten sheet called the "Boston News-Letter" was published. It lasted until 1776.

### **3.2. Developing Content**

The content of most early newspapers in Europe and the American colonies consisted of information about business and commerce, along with local gossip and stories. They generally tracked shipping, provided market information, covered import and export news, and offered trade tips. Many of the newspapers were primarily concerned with selling advertising and, in fact, carried the word "advertiser" in their title. Most papers were also produced by printers with no "journalists" on staff, since the owners simply reprinted news, rather than actively covering it (see *History of Journalism*). Also, because of the obvious economies associated with distribution, most newspaper publishers were also postmasters.

Gradually, newspapers took on the establishment, providing political commentary, yet not without consequence. In America, anger over British policies led to editorials critical of the government. In 1721, colonial printer James Franklin introduced local news along with wit in his newspaper the "New England Courant". He was jailed for his sarcastic comments, but ran the paper through his 13-year-old brother Benjamin who later went on to publish his own newspaper and became a famous and wealthy publisher and politician. Libel against the government, known as seditious libel, was punishable, despite the famous trial of John Peter Zenger, a publisher who criticized the New York governor in 1734. Zenger won his case, but seditious libel remained on the books until 1800. Press freedom was finally recognized in the newly formed United States with the creation of the First Amendment to its Constitution (see *Telecommunications Policy*). Soon after, a partisan press period developed, with outspoken newspapers affiliated with political parties.

Journalism then changed significantly when innovative marketing and technological improvements brought affordable newspapers to the middle and lower classes (see *History of Journalism*). Benjamin Day is credited with founding the "penny press" in 1833, offering police news and human-interest stories in an easy-to-read format. At this time, several new concepts took off, such as employing specialized "reporters" and selling papers on the street rather than by subscription. Newspaper coverage was vastly improved with the development of wire services and press associations, such as the Associated Press. The wire services meant greater international coverage, foreign correspondents, and reduced costs through shared resources (see *International Communications and Media Networks*). Before the turn of the century, competition between William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer spawned an era of investigative reporting and sensationalism known as "yellow journalism". Yet by the middle of the twentieth century, papers such as the New York Times led the way with more interpretive reporting.

### **3.3. Competition and Consolidation**

For newspapers, the rest of the twentieth century was marked by competition, industry consolidation and, in some countries, declining readership. During the 1920s and 1930s, magazines and a newly created radio industry were competing with newspapers for advertising dollars, prompting many newspapers to consolidate. Newspaper chains continued to proliferate with the dawn of television. Moreover, many communities in the U.S. could no longer support more than one paper. With circulation and advertising revenues leveling off, the decline in newspaper operations began to raise concerns about editorial diversity. In some cases, readership also declined, particularly among young adults. Nonetheless, newspaper readership has remained strong in some countries. In Japan, newspaper subscriptions more than double those per household in the U.S.

Today, there are roughly 60,000 newspapers around the world, with approximately 500 million circulation. Fewer than one in eight are dailies. About one-third are published in North America, another third in Europe, and the remaining third elsewhere. Countries with the highest newspaper readership are Sweden, Britain, Norway, Denmark, Japan and the U.S. Nonetheless, some 40 countries in Asia and Africa have only crude news sheets or no newspapers at all.

Entering into the new millennium, newspapers are reinventing themselves, becoming more user-friendly and lifestyle-oriented. Many newspapers are also expanding their operations with online newspapers and through "convergence" with broadcast news operations. The role and training of newspaper journalists is undergoing change, as some now also voice and videotape their reports for immediate webcasting (see *Traditional and Modern Media: see Communications for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*).

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**Laurie Thomas Lee** is an Associate Professor of Broadcasting in the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Her research interests are in the areas of communications law, new technologies and media economics. Recent publications focus on privacy law and the Internet. She has two published book chapters as well as refereed journal articles in such journals as the *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, *The Journal of Media Economics*, *The Information Society: An International Journal*, *Telematics and Informatics*, the *New Jersey Journal of Communication*, *The John Marshall Law Review*, and *California Western Law Review*. Lee has presented 15 national and international conference papers, with several receiving top paper awards. She has been awarded three research grants, including one from the National Association of Broadcasters. In addition to consulting, Lee has given over a dozen panel presentations and has received two teaching awards. Lee holds a Ph.D. in Mass Media from Michigan State University (1993), and an M.A. in Communications from the University of Iowa (1982).