

EVOLUTION OF JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATION

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Summary

Journalism dates back many centuries, to a time before modern forms of mass communication. This essay looks at the evolution of journalism and mass communication worldwide, from its earliest days to today. The chapter looks at five major trends in that evolution. The first trend is technological. Over the centuries, technical innovations and inventions have brought increased speed of production and

information delivery, reduced costs, improved accuracy, and significant transformations of the news product. Second, the ownership of journalism outlets—newsletters, newspapers, magazines, and broadcast stations—has become increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few. However, with the introduction of relatively inexpensive digital technology, the number of voices has proliferated. Third, the audience for journalism and mass communication is changing. When journalism started, news was aimed at the most affluent in society. With technological changes that began in the nineteenth century, journalism started to reach the masses.

In the second half of the twentieth century, however, media researchers, programmers, and advertisers began to recognize that the smaller, more segmented audience was better. Segmentation became the watchword at the end of the twentieth century. The multiplicity of voices on the Internet is tailor-made for this segmentation. Fourth, journalism and journalists are moving toward professionalism. More and more journalists across the world are college educated or have received specialized training in journalism. Fifth, the journalism workforce is beginning to diversify. Although the typical journalist remains a man from the established, dominant cultural group of the country, more women and cultural/racial/religious minorities are entering the profession. The chapter concludes with an evaluation of where journalism and mass communication are going in the new century.

1. Introduction

In most developed countries, journalism and mass communication are just the staples of modern life. Newspapers and magazines bring the news of the world as well as the amusements of the day to the doorstep. Radio news and talk programs update the listener at the workplace, in the car, in the home, everywhere. Television links sound with pictures during the regularly scheduled news broadcasts or at any time in the event of breaking news. One click on a web site takes the browser across the world to download a story, a radio program, a song, or a snippet of the latest motion picture. In developed countries, journalism and the many, many messages of mass communication have led to the malaise of modern society—“information overload.” Citizens in developed countries have so much to read, hear, see, and click that it is difficult to process all the information.

Journalism and mass communication are not as plentiful in developing countries. Nonetheless, journalism and mass communication are important to the economic, social, political, and cultural lives of these nations. Some governments attempt to control the content of news and the messages transmitted in the media. Other governments see journalism and mass communication as important partners in economic, political, and social progress of their nations. These governments see journalism and mass communication as allies to progress, ways to educate the population about life, politics, culture, and the economy in a modern world. Still others see the media as a means of cultural domination by the West.

Whether journalism and mass communication are taken for granted—as is the case in the developed countries—or are seen as allies to progress or things to be controlled—as

is the case in many of the developing countries—they remain important influences in the social, economic, and political lives of the people in today's world.

2. Themes Affecting Journalism and Mass Communication

The history of journalism and mass communication is a complicated story. It is written in the history of every country. It is intertwined with the evolution of each culture. It touches the life of every person. From this complex tale emerge five themes.

One theme is technological. Through the centuries, technical innovations—some directly related to journalism and mass communication, others touching on the media only tangentially—have brought increased speed to production and information delivery, reduced costs, improved accuracy, or transformed/improved the product. The technological innovations have not been limited to one country or one culture. All have contributed to the technological state of today's media.

The second theme deals with ownership patterns. When journalism began, anyone affluent enough to hire a scribe or, later, buy a printing press could run a newspaper or magazine. As technology improved, the price tag for production, programming, and distribution increased. Because the cost of production, programming, and/or distribution increased so dramatically, fewer and fewer could afford to purchase and run newsletters, newspapers, magazines, and radio and television stations. Thus, the ownership of the media was concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. In the nineteenth century, journalism and mass communication had become big business in many developed countries. For example, in the United States, the Hearst Corp. and Scripps-Howard, still key media corporations, trace their roots to this time. The twentieth century brought a further concentration of media ownership. Corporations or government agencies now control most of the largest circulating newspapers, and the biggest radio stations, television networks, and programming production houses in the developed world. Digital technology may change this trend. As prices of personal computers and access to the Internet decrease, more individuals can—and do—publish electronically nationally and internationally.

The third theme revolves around the defined audience for the media. Centuries ago, only the literate, moneyed elite could afford the newsletters, newspapers, pamphlets, and magazines; but technology changed that too. With advances in print technology, the price of newspapers and magazines came down. At the same time, changes to layout, design, and writing style made newspapers and magazines more visually appealing, more readable, and more popular with larger numbers of the reading public. Newspapers and magazines truly became forms of mass communication. The “new media” of radio, television, and the movies had enormous popular appeal from their beginnings. However, technology could also take away. By the end of the twentieth century, bigger was not necessarily better. Media researchers, programmers, and advertisers saw technology as a means to reach smaller, “better,” more segmented, affluent audiences. Thus, because of technology, the potential audience of journalism and mass communication has gone from a small moneyed elite to a “mass” audience to a segmented audience, grouped by interest, socio-economic, demographic, and psychographic factors.

Technology also weaves its way through the fourth theme that marked the evolution of journalism and mass communication: the movement toward professionalism. When journalism first began, there were no real performance standards for reporters and editors. The first editors/journalists were little more than propagandists for one particular point of view or political party. They were technicians, individuals trained in the technology current in the day; scribes when newsletters were handwritten; printers when newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets were hand set. As technology became more complex in the nineteenth century, the craft of production split from the content function. It was only then that the editors/journalists could and did slowly develop some of the standards commonly associated with journalism in the developed countries today. Over time, accuracy, fairness, and objectivity became accepted standards in much of the developed world where there is a free exchange of information. Journalists/editors have not always met those standards. In times of war, patriotism and a concern for public morale sometimes curtailed telling the whole story.

During an election, a reporter's personal views of a candidate or a political party could and did creep into a news story, although not necessarily intentionally. In times of instantaneous reporting and extreme competition, journalists sometimes got the story first—but not necessarily fully or accurately. It is little wonder that the public has become more skeptical of journalism in particular and mass communication in general. That skepticism seems ironic given the changes that have taken place in the training of journalists. Once requiring little more than an ability to write clearly, energy to report the story, and a generally affable personality, journalists are now better trained than ever before. Most journalists entering the field today have university/college educations or special journalistic training. The move toward better education can be seen across the media field. Media executives to technicians all have advanced training to help them deal with the challenges of journalism and mass communication in the twenty-first century.

Finally, opportunities are opening for minorities in journalism and mass communication. When journalism and mass communication began, it was a closed society. Individuals who owned printing presses taught their families the trade and took in others as apprentices. Female relatives and slaves owned by the printer's family learned the trade, but with the split between the production and editing function, and changes in social expectations, fewer women and minorities were allowed in. Although today males from the dominant cultural/ethnic group of the nation still predominate, diversity in the journalistic workplace is seen as a benefit. By the end of the twentieth century, many media corporations and arms of government that control mass communication are at least articulating the importance of diversity in the newsroom and in entertainment programming, and are beginning to hire from different populations, but primarily on the lower levels. Diverse leadership and ownership in the media continue to be rare.

3. Technology Brings Changes to Journalism and Mass Communication

Technology weaves its way throughout each of the trends that explain the evolution of journalism and mass communication in today's society, and it is with technology that the story must begin.

3.1. Earliest History

The roots of journalism can be found in many locations. The Sumerians developed the art of phonic writing centuries before the birth of Christ. This same culture developed a cylinder seal to inscribe its ownership records onto wet clay surfaces. This early form of “printing” also allowed the Sumerians to “report” on the prowess of their warriors. In perhaps the first example of sensationalism (although certainly not the last), the Sumerians printed exaggerated muscular features on their pictured warriors.

The written word was not limited to the Sumerians. Other cultures, the Egyptians, the Phoenicians, and the Chinese, all had written alphabets, and thus an ability to communicate information over long distances. Each took advantage of this, spreading its alphabet and culture across the region through trade, colonization, and/or conquest.

Journalism, by definition, needs several things. First, it must have a written language. Second, it must have a certain level of literacy among at least a portion of the population. Third, it demands a certain level of affluence among the literate population. These individuals must be able to afford the news product and have the leisure time to read it. Finally, this affluent, literate population must have an interest in current events.

These factors coalesced earliest in two locations—ancient Rome and China.

3.2. Earliest News Sheets

Launched in 59 BC in ancient Rome by Julius Caesar, *Acta Diurna Populi Romani* (Daily Acts of the Roman People) was a script account of the news of the empire. As an official publication of Caesar’s government, the *Acta Diurna* circulated to the rich and powerful in the empire; each issue was posted in public places for citizens to read. The *Acta* contained details of government business—decrees, proclamations, and resolutions, news of the most affluent and powerful of the empire, catastrophic stories (fires and executions), and the weather. Although no issues exist today, the *Acta Diurna* survived some two centuries, evolving from primarily official news to more popular fare.

The Chinese version of a news organ, *ti-pao*, developed several centuries later. During the T’ang dynasty (618–907 AD), the *ti-pao* circulated among government officials in the far-flung Chinese empire. Over time, as literacy increased, the circulation of *ti-pao* expanded to intellectuals and other affluent citizens. That circulation increase was due, in large part, to technological innovations peculiar to China.

It was in China that papermaking first developed some five centuries prior to the debut of the *ti-pao*. This papermaking technology spread to Korea and Japan and, through the Arabs, to the Middle East. It would take centuries before the innovation reached Europe.

3.3. Technological Advances in Printing—Part I—and Paper-Making Production

The expanded circulation of the *ti-pao* was also due to technological innovations in printing, which the Chinese did not export. Many centuries before Gutenberg developed

the technology of movable type printing in the west, China had developed a modern process of mechanical printing on paper. Initially, artisans developed a way to reproduce writing by carving designs on wooden blocks. The designs were then inked and painstakingly pressed on paper. Four centuries before Gutenberg, Pi Sheng, a metal worker, invented a press that used movable letters of metal, clay, and wood.

These rudimentary forms of journalism developed independently in two of the most technologically advanced cultures at the time—in the West (ancient Rome) and in the East (China). In both locations, however, journalism sprang from similar impulses—literacy among an affluent population who had time to read and needed information. Of the two cultures, the Chinese was clearly the more technologically advanced. Europeans would need centuries to develop the papermaking and movable type technologies needed for a modern journalism system.

3.4. Decline of Journalism in the West

The decline of journalism in the West and the lack of technological progress in Europe can be traced to political (and, by implication, economic) events. Much of Europe was part of the Roman Empire. In the fourth and fifth centuries, that empire dissolved, and with it, much of the progress/order associated with the Romans. Trade and transportation degenerated. Literacy declined. Written newsheets disappeared.

Journalism did not reemerge until the fourteenth century, with the development of an alphabet in the native languages in each of the emerging European states, the need for information brought on by the reinstatement of trade, and the relative affluence of a group of literate individuals. As was the case in Rome centuries before, journalism in Europe reemerged as handwritten newsheets. It is impossible to say with certainty what country or city reintroduced journalism to the Western world, but early newsletters were known to exist in Venice and Rome. It is because of this flourishing environment of journalism, growing literacy, reestablished trade, and the development of state/country, that technological advances in printing and papermaking were made possible in Europe.

3.5. Technological Advances in Printing—Part II

By the end of the thirteenth century, the manufacture of paper had been introduced into Europe. With it came significant cost reductions. Yet the Europeans were slow to adopt the technology. Historians have given many explanations for this, including religious bigotry (paper had been associated with the Jews and the Arabs) and the reluctance of craftsmen to use the new product. That reluctance was effectively eliminated with Gutenberg's movable type innovations in printing, which spread quickly through Europe. By 1480, just 35 years after Gutenberg printed the first bibles in Germany, more than 110 towns in Western Europe and England had printing presses employing some version of movable type. By the end of the fourteenth century, about 1000 printers worked in 236 printing centers in Europe and England.

Accompanying the expansion of printing technology was the adoption of papermaking. Religious bigotry and craftsmen's inertia might have slowed the technology's adoption, but once printing presses were increasing the production of reading material, more

paper was needed. Paper had one huge advantage; it was inexpensive. At the end of the fourteenth century, paper cost only about one sixth the amount of parchment.

The new printing centers needed lots of paper because printers were literally creating an information revolution. More books, newsletters, newspapers, and broadsides were produced than ever before. According to one historian, during just the first 50 years of printing, printers produced more books than had been available during the previous 1000 years. During the next 100 years, another 150 million to 200 million books were produced. That production was fueled by the demands of a growing literate population and the theological debate that raged during the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. Although printers and printing were thriving, they were not necessarily free. As with any technology, governments moved to control printing and printers.

European governments employed a proverbial carrot-and-stick approach to the control of this new technology. On the carrot side, governments used monopolies and contracts to assure a printer's loyalty and to punish enemies. Thus, a printer who supported the crown might be given a monopoly, an exclusive privilege, to print certain types of documents. Likewise, by awarding contracts, governments could reward their printing allies and punish their enemies. Governments could and did give extremely lucrative printing contracts to loyal printers. If the printer published material critical of the crown, the contract would be taken away.

On the stick side, governments used a wide range of repressive measures. Early in the history of printing, the printer was licensed and the number of printers was strictly controlled. With time, however, measures became more repressive. Some governments used prior restraint or outright censorship. Harsh penalties were levied for unlicensed printing of materials that challenged the government or the clergy. In France, that meant flogging for the first offense, death for the second. In England, punishment could be just as severe. For example, William Carter, a Catholic in Protestant England, printed a book in 1580 critical of the queen. He was soon arrested, tortured, and executed. Other printers and writers were imprisoned. Such practices were common in Europe, where seditious libel laws were applied to any printed work critical of the government—even if the material were true. Nor was criticism of the government the only grounds for punishment. Printers could be fined, imprisoned, beaten, or even put to death for publishing material questioning established religious doctrines.

As European countries began colonization in the “new world” of the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Australia, they exported the printing technology and the repressive legislation. But even as the repression continued, production of reading materials accelerated, aided by the larger number of skilled printers, the greater number of printing presses, and the seemingly insatiable appetite for reading material.

3.6. Technological Revolution of the Nineteenth Century

The nineteenth century was a time of enormous technological change. The Industrial Revolution had mechanized production in many trades. Printing and innovations associated with it were only part of the larger Industrial Revolution in developed countries.

3.6.1 Photography

Inventors in England and France worked independently to perfect the photographic process. In 1839, Louis Daguerre demonstrated the daguerreotype process (using a silver iodine as the light sensitive substance) in France. At the same time, William Henry Fox Talbot worked in England with the calotype process (using salt with silver nitrate). In 1839, English scientist Sir John Herschel developed the hypo process that allowed Talbot's and Daguerre's processes—and others that followed—to be extensively used in Europe and, soon after, America. Photographers of this early period probably never saw themselves as journalists; nonetheless, these individuals were truly the predecessors of today's photojournalists. Because of limitations to these early processes (long exposure times did not allow movement), the earliest photographs were staged, stilted portraits of the famous or affluent. By 1855, however, photographic technology had progressed far enough for the first accredited war photographer, Roger Fenton from England, to cover the Crimean War. Six years later, American photographers Mathew Brady, Timothy O'Sullivan, Alexander Gardner, and others were covering that country's Civil War. As powerful as the war photography of this time was, none of the photos could be reproduced in the newspapers and magazines: engravers merely converted the photographs to illustrations that newspapers and magazines could reproduce. It would not be until the end of the century that technology would allow newspapers and magazines to reproduce photographs.

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Biographical Sketch

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