THE DYNAMICS OF AMERICAN JOURNALISM FROM 1787 TO 1865

The formation of the Federal constitution in 1787 and the establishment under it of a strong government invigorated political life in the United States; forces were soon at work which clarified the groupings that were shortly to eventuate in organized political parties on a national scale. At once public opinion acquired a practical value for the managers of the new organizations, because it was only by molding the views of voters that they could hope to win and maintain control of the ship of state.

Confronted by this exigency the leaders naturally turned to the newspaper press as an instrument adaptable to the work at hand. Under the compulsion of political necessities journalism took on new characteristics. Thus the colonial sheets, by and large without regular editorial matter or propaganda purpose, gave way in the early years of the republic to journals devoted to the manufacture of public opinion for party ends. In the new papers editorials began to appear, at first irregularly and then in every issue; proprietors and managers of the press were no longer so exclusively practical printers, but tended to be writing men who could phrase ideas effectively and destroy opposing partisans with vitriolic invective.¹

Prominent party leaders like Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson guided the transformation of the American press from unenterprising purveyors of stale news to important corps in the shock troops of party conflict. They fostered the establishment of newspapers wherever and whenever it seemed politically advantageous, often digging into their own pockets for the necessary outlay of capital, and selecting as editors men loyal to partisan causes and able to promote them with their pens. When such party-sponsored projects fell into financial difficulties, money for relief was usually forthcoming from party sources. Indeed, politicians in office did not

¹The transformation of journalism into a political influence is illustrated by twenty-five facsimiles of eighteenth century newspapers in Bernard Faÿ, Notes on the American Press at the End of the Eighteenth Century (New York, 1927). There were, of course, some partisan papers in the colonies, for example those in Pennsylvania that championed the proprietary or the popular causes (cf. Arthur M. Schlesinger, “Politics, Propaganda, and the Philadelphia Press,” PenNSYLVANIA Magazine of History and Biography, Lx. 309-22).
Scruple to assist their journalistic friends with bounty from the public treasury; sinecures and contracts for printing enabled many a faithful organ to continue its existence. Party chieftains also directed the opinion creating function of their press with suggestions on editorial policy, and sometimes supplemented with products of their own pens the literary efforts of their journalistic henchmen.

So close was the connection between press and party that in the early years of the nineteenth century the political complexion of newspapers coincided with the geographical distribution of the parties. While Federalist New England harbored few Republican papers, the Republican regions embracing the South and the frontier states of Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee supported scarcely any Federalist organs. In Pennsylvania, however, the journals were more evenly divided in their allegiance. While thus extending throughout the nation party journalism reached an apex at the capital. Here the party in power had its national organ, the special pet of the administration, which authoritatively announced sound party doctrine and led the forces of partisan propaganda in the electoral fray. The organs in Washington, moreover, waxed and waned with the fortunes of their respective political parties and factions.

However precarious their individual positions were, the Washington papers enjoying the federal patronage occupied an enviable place. Such journals received, by the second quarter of the nineteenth century, really vast amounts for printing ordered by the two houses of Congress. Printing for the twenty-second Congress, meeting for the first time in December, 1831, amounted to over $142,000. The sum for the twenty-third Congress ran up to $353,000, for the twenty-fourth to $154,000, for the twenty-fifth to $218,000. The printing bill for the Congresses from the twenty-second to the thirtieth, covering the years from 1831 to 1849, amounted to over

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$2,000,000.\textsuperscript{8} Apparently there were substantial rewards for the journalistic allies of those holding the federal purse strings. The significant influence of such bounty upon the editorial course of the recipients is obvious.

Throughout the 'thirties and 'forties newspapers published outside of Washington, as well as those at the capital, exhibited a thoroughly partisan character. According to Frederic Hudson, a veteran of years of service on the New York \textit{Herald}, the belief prevailed among newspaper men that “no journal of any respectability could be established without the consent of politicians and the pecuniary aid of party.”\textsuperscript{9} The Philadelphia \textit{Public Ledger} declared in 1836 that with few exceptions the press was “a mere tool for the dissemination of particular views.”\textsuperscript{5} This characteristic was confirmed by James Silk Buckingham, an Englishman who, after visiting the United States in 1838, commented:\textsuperscript{6}

Everything is distorted to serve party views. If the largest meeting is got up on one side, the opposite party declares it to be a mere handful in numbers. If the parties are ever so wealthy and respectable, they are pronounced to be a set of needy vagabonds. If the talent of the speeches should be of the highest kind, they would call them mere drivellings. . . . When a writer of the Whig party has to describe a meeting of their own side, however, he can find no terms sufficiently swelling and lofty in which to express himself. . . . Their “thunder” is not like any other thunder that was ever heard before, and the very globe seems to be shaken to its centre by their gigantic powers.

James Fenimore Cooper, the novelist, was satisfied that the public press, “as a whole,” owed “its existence to the schemes of interested political adventurers.”\textsuperscript{7}

Horace Greeley later admitted a partisan motivation in his state-

\textsuperscript{8} \textit{Congressional Globe}, 32 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 124. The figures given in the \textit{Globe} are separated for House and Senate. Probably contracts for most of this were awarded on a basis of political favoritism. Although an Act of May 18, 1842, provided that departmental printing be given to the lowest bidder, and a joint resolution of August 3, 1846, extended the principle to congressional printing (\textit{Cong. Globe}, 32 Cong., 1 Sess., App., 121), the Act of August 3, 1852, removed these restrictions (\textit{Statutes at Large}, X. 30-35). An authoritative untangling of the details in this matter must await the study of the history of the public printing.

\textsuperscript{9} Hudson had been on the \textit{Herald} from 1836, the year after its establishment. Hudson, \textit{op. cit.}, 410-11.

\textsuperscript{6} Bleyer, \textit{op. cit.}, 176-77.

\textsuperscript{5} James Silk Buckingham, \textit{America, Historical, Statistic, and Descriptive} (New York, 1841), I. 123-24.

\textsuperscript{7} James Fenimore Cooper, \textit{The American Democrat} quoted in Buckingham, \textit{America}, II. 46.

I had been incited to this enterprise by several Whig friends, who deemed a cheap daily, addressed more especially to the laboring class, eminently needed in our city, where the only two cheap journals . . . were in decided, though unavowed, and therefore more effective, sympathy and affiliation with the Democratic party.

The Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican was launched during the presidential campaign of 1844, with professed political affiliations. Its first editorial stated: "We need hardly say that the politics of the Daily Republican will be Whig—Faneuil Hall Whig. . . . In this campaign we intend the Daily Republican shall be a vigilant and active auxiliary of the Whig cause."\footnote{Bleyer, *op. cit.*, 253-54.}

This directly partisan nature of the press continued through the 'fifties and into the Civil War. A picture of the fundamental forces governing daily journalism for the period from 1856 to 1865 contains many features already suggested. In the mid-fifties the Washington Union expressed itself on the function of the press by declaring: "No party could exist for a year without it. It is a great beneficiary for politicians—their main reliance, and their only means of acquiring public notoriety."\footnote{Lambert A. Wilmer, *Our Press Gang; or a Complete Exposition of the Corruptions and Crimes of American Newspapers* (Philadelphia and London, 1859), 209.} In a slightly different vein Edward Everett, the distinguished orator, commented: "The newspaper press of the United States is, for good or evil, the most powerful influence that acts on the public mind."\footnote{Wilmer, *op. cit.*, 64-65.}

This powerful agency for the shaping of public opinion was supported to a considerable degree by government patronage. Favored newspapers received contracts for printing and advertising for the federal government.\footnote{John W. Forney, *Anecdotes of Public Men, originally published in the Washington Sunday Chronicle and Philadelphia Press* (New York, 1873-1881), I, 105, 384.} One editor, apparently not a recipient of such bounty, complained of the "most extravagant expenditure of public funds" for printing, and called government advertising "the giving of fat jobs to political editors."\footnote{Philadelphia Evening Journal, February 2, 1858.} The use of federal printing as a means of subsidizing the press came to an end with the establishment
of the Government Printing Office in 1861. But this did not eliminate favored newspapers from the bounties provided through printing for state governments. There was also county and municipal printing and advertising. In Philadelphia the sums thus expended ran to considerable figures. During the Civil War years the city alone spent from seven to ten thousand dollars annually for the publication in the newspapers of lists of delinquent tax payers, liens on property for registered taxes, municipal ordinances, and the annual statement of the city controller.\textsuperscript{14} The publication of notices of sheriff's sales was an important piece of patronage for newspapers in Philadelphia, but no record of the amounts thus spent exists.

Party newspapers also benefited from the fact that government employees were recruited as subscribers or even assessed for contributions. Some cases seemed to warrant the statement of Lambert A. Wilmer, who had served party ends from an editor's chair in Philadelphia: "Party organs are maintained, in a great measure, by taxes levied on the persons employed in Custom-Houses, Post-Offices, etc.; every one of whom . . . is required to devote a portion of his salary to the support of some worthless and corrupt newspaper."\textsuperscript{15} Possibly more important was the practice of rewarding faithful "organ-grinders," as the conductors of the party press were sometimes called, with places for themselves and their relatives. There is much to confirm another statement by Wilmer written in 1859:\textsuperscript{16}

In every department of the public service more persons are employed than are necessary to do the work, and many of the supernumeraries are the sons, brothers, nephews, uncles, cousins, or particular friends of editors, to whose influence they are indebted for their offices. Sometimes editors themselves are office-holders, with liberal salaries, numerous perquisites, and scarcely any thing to do.

\textsuperscript{14} See \textit{Annual Report of the City Controller of Philadelphia} for the years from 1860 to 1865. The sum given in the statement represents the main items; in other appropriations for printing, advertising, and stationery, an undeterminable amount would be paid to newspapers.

\textsuperscript{15} Wilmer, \textit{op. cit.}, 195; testimony of Stephen G. Dodge, a former employee of the Pension Office who refused to subscribe to the Washington \textit{Constitution} in 1859, before the Covode committee, \textit{House Reports}, 36 Cong., 1 Sess., V, no. 648, p. 575. The Covode committee, with John Covode, a Pennsylvania Republican, as chairman, heard witnesses from late March into June, 1860; its report, a Republican campaign document, will hereinafter be cited as \textit{Covode Report}.

\textsuperscript{16} Wilmer, \textit{op. cit.}, 195.
The bounty bestowed by printing, advertising, and office-holding significantly influenced the content of the newspapers and restricted editorial independence. Wilmer described the "pitiable" "slavery of political editors": "They dare not express an opinion or publish a syllable without the approbation of their party leaders." 17 A better description, without this note of exaggeration, came during the presidential canvass of 1856 from the Philadelphia Public Ledger, which was notably free from the bonds of party journalism: 18

The greater portion of the press of this country is, at the present time, nothing more than the vehicle of partisan intemperance... All they desire to effect is to bias their readers in favor of some one party or other, to secure the election of its leader. To do this they mystify the truth, pervert the facts, and endeavor to inflame the feelings of their readers, till they become too fanatical to look for truth or to regard it as the first essential to success... The readers of such journals are not allowed to read anything else than politics. Trade, commerce, and business, which concern every man in the community, are made of secondary importance to the great duty of periodically saving the country, and helping political editors keep up their journals till a fine fat office rewards their arduous labors.

During the same campaign the Philadelphia Evening Journal, rejoicing in its independence from the obligations of unrestrained partisanship, regretted that "partisan venom" was leading the political journals to represent the presidential nominees as "the worst scoundrels who ever went 'unwhipt of justice.'" 19

A few years later, when Anthony Trollope, the English novelist, visited America, he observed that with the newspapers "a political party end is always in view." 20 As to prevailing journalistic practices he wrote "Falsehood has become so much a matter of course with American newspapers that it has almost ceased to be falsehood." 21

Without conceding any zeal for falsehood or misrepresentation an alert party organ like the Philadelphia North American could point out the important interdependence of the party organization and the party press in a critical contest such as was waged in the gubernatorial campaign of 1863. It undertook to rally its editorial brethren with the following appeal: 22

We trust that our friends of the loyal newspaper press throughout the State of Pennsylvania are alive to the vast importance of the canvass which is to

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17 Wilmer, op. cit., 70. 18 Philadelphia Public Ledger, September 2, 1856.
19 Philadelphia Evening Journal, October 14, 1856.
20 Anthony Trollope, North America (New York, 1862), 575-76.
21 Ibid., 574-75. 22 Philadelphia North American, August 6, 1863.
terminate in October next, and are prepared to enter upon the work at once, and with more than usual energy, for very much, indeed, of the hopes of the party rest with them. They have it in their power to stir up the people of the whole interior to do their duty in the great crisis which is upon us. . . . It is fortunate that these rural papers are conducted by men of intelligence and ability, who are unswerving in their devotion to the principles and candidates of the Union party. We make no doubt that they will see at once the unusual importance of the campaign, and proceed promptly to open it with all their wonted vigor. But if any of them feel in need of aid to enable them to carry on the canvass, they can have it freely and without charge by application to the party organizations in Philadelphia. Wherever we have Union men of literary tastes and ability within reach of loyal country newspapers, we urge them to tender their services at once to the editor, and do all they can to aid him in the canvass. To the editors themselves we would say, the most vital matter of all is organization. Strenuously insist upon that in every county, township and election district.

But this was a brand of tactics that could be utilized by the opposition as well as the administration forces. The North American, therefore, was alarmed when the Democratic party took action to mobilize its press for efficient work in the same campaign. It promptly sounded a note of warning against false and malicious propaganda:

By order of the Democratic State Committee, the Democratic editors of Pennsylvania assembled in this city yesterday, to be instructed how to conduct the canvass, to make arrangements for inserting a stated amount of political matter in every issue of their papers, etc. Do our friends understand this? From the present day up to the hour of the election these Democratic organs will be stuffed to repletion with inflammatory electioneering harangues, false charges against the Administration, slanders against the army, denunciations of the war, and so on, all manufactured at one common mint in Philadelphia, and sent forth to each paper in printed slips.

While the necessities of political parties were the dominant force in directing the course of newspapers, business interests also influenced American journalism. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century wealthy individuals—the large merchants, bankers, and iron masters—were generally members of the Whig party. As a result the influence of wealth fused with that of party in operating upon the newspapers. In sympathy with the doctrine promulgated by Whig papers, they gave their advertising patronage to Whig journals. With this support—the circulation of a paper not being profitable in

23 Ibid., August 12, 1863.
Whig newspapers were enabled to procure earlier news, better reports of events, and to conduct all their departments with more talent. Consequently, they outstripped their Democratic rivals not only in circulation, but also in number. Thus by the control of business advertising the wealthy classes had more influential newspapers on their side. This was especially true in large eastern cities. In the late 'thirties New York had ten large daily papers, profitable enterprises devoted to the Whig party, while affiliated with the Democratic party were but two large dailies, barely subsisting. In Philadelphia as well most of the newspapers were Whig while the one or two Democratic journals eked out a hand to mouth existence, with hardly enough income to meet their expenses.

While the profits from advertising effectively allied most prosperous journals to the party of wealth, it also rendered newspapers more or less subservient to any particular business interest that had advertising to bestow and an accompanying desire to control public opinion. This situation was observed by James Silk Buckingham, an English traveller whose own experience in journalism led him to scrutinize the American press. He recorded:

With few exceptions, the universal opinion of the American people themselves is, that the praise or censure of anything may be procured in the newspapers by interested parties for a few dollars, and that there is no influence more open to bribery and corruption than that of the newspaper press. The greater number of the editors are persons who embrace the occupation temporarily, and escape from it when anything better offers, and both with them and the proprietors, the “advertising interests” of the paper are of far more importance than its sale or its character. These interests are therefore carefully studied and sedulously cultivated, by submission to the wishes and feelings of the advertisers; so that there is scarcely any one who advertises largely, and patronizes a particular paper, that may not get almost any communication inserted in it.

Buckingham’s observation was supported by the judgment of Lambert A. Wilmer, who after a score of years on Philadelphia journals wrote in 1859:

Every man who advertises largely in the newspapers is one of the masters of the press... Moneyed corporations, (to which many of the editors are deeply indebted, and which actually maintain not a few of them), possess unlimited authority over the “free and independent newspaper press of our country.”


26Buckingham, \textit{op. cit.}, II. 402.

27Wilmer, \textit{op. cit.}, 70-71.
Banks were among the business interests which early made use of the newspapers. Since these financial institutions operated under charters given them by the state, they were interested in maintaining a favorable public opinion toward their activities. One of the most profitable banking transactions was the issuance of bank notes, but the frequent overissue of this paper with the resulting suspension of specie payments became a great evil.  

The banks, however, by loans to newspaper editors and also the dependence of the journalists upon the banking interests for advertising, effectively silenced the press, and the evils of bank note money were not often ventilated in the newspapers. Commenting upon their silence, John C. Calhoun concluded as early as 1816 that the banks had, “in a great measure, a control over the press.”

While the state banks were content that the newspapers avoid discussion which might raise a popular demand for reform, the iron masters of Pennsylvania on occasion desired an active campaign for a protective tariff. An illuminating comment on their influence over the press is found in a letter which a correspondent of Salmon P. Chase wrote in the spring of 1860: “The Tariff is the one idea... You are quite aware that a few leading manufacturers of iron do much toward controlling public sentiment in Pa.”

With the coming of railroads in the era before the Civil War the basis was laid for a new business interest which upon occasion utilized the services of the press. An early illustration of such use occurred in 1860 when the Pennsylvania Railroad enlisted the newspapers of the state in its desperate fight to secure the repeal of the burdensome tonnage tax placed upon its freight business. Here the function of the press—its cooperation secured by generous advertising—was to combat the widespread prejudice against the railroad as a moneyed corporation.

While bankers, iron manufacturers, and railroad executives were interested at times in the broader strategy of controlling opinion,
many petty economic interests as well sought the aid of the press in order to enrich themselves at the expense of the public. When dominated by advertising patronage newspapers not only failed to denounce fraudulent insurance companies, conjurers, quack nostrums, and other impostures, but assisted in the fleecing of the gullible populace by inserting in their editorial columns "puffs" for these fakes. Even artists, painters, and musicians were willing to pay for favorable newspaper comment, while publishers were also anxious to secure the approbation of the press for the books and periodicals they offered to the public. For example, George W. Childs, an enterprising Philadelphia publisher, wrote to John Russell Young, then in charge of the Philadelphia Press:

I send you a copy of Cook's book and enclose you two or three additional copies which I would like you to send by mail to such editorial friends as will give it a lift.

I would like to have 300 copies of the "Press" containing your notice of the work as I will send them to the leading editors and booksellers.

These illustrations of the use of newspapers to promote business undertakings were dwarfed by the grand manner in which Jay Cooke, the Philadelphia banker, marshalled the press of the land to push the sale of government bonds during the Civil War. Made sole subscription agent for the loans, he sold in a period of a little over two years about a billion dollars worth of securities for commissions ranging up to three-fourths of one per cent. This gigantic financial operation was only made possible by the skill with which Cooke used the public press. Distributing advertising with a lavish hand, he engaged a corps of able newspaper writers to turn out editorial and other matter on the loan for insertion in the journals which were ready to accommodate the Gargantuan advertiser. Every effort was made to invigorate the work of the papers in pushing the loan; their editors and correspondents were visited by Cooke's agents, showered with hospitality, and loaded with presents of wine, ducks, and fish sent in wholesale quantities from Cooke's old home in Toledo. Some writers were even given opportunities to profit by speculation in government securities which their efforts might enhance.

Wilmer, op. cit., 157-58.
George W. Childs to John Russell Young, November 6, 1862; also February 13, 1863, Young MSS.
Illustrations of the publicity which Cooke secured abound in the editorial pages of the Philadelphia newspapers. Thus the Evening Bulletin, carrying advertising for the loan, declared editorially, “The National debt is . . . a National Blessing,” and urged the people to subscribe for the bonds.

It is most gratifying to see not only the large accumulations of the capitalist, but the little, hard-won earnings of the artisan and the laborer, and the modest savings of the widow, are trustingly confided to the use of that Government which alike protects the rights, and redresses the wrongs of the rich and the poor.

The staid North American likewise persistently filled its broad editorial columns with arguments to prove the soundness of the government credit, the iniquity of gold speculators, the wisdom of Secretary of the Treasury Chase, and the extraordinary advantages of investing in the government loan. The Philadelphia Daily News also puffed the loan vigorously:

It is safe; that no loyal man or woman will dispute. It pays well; no other permanent investment will yield, at the present time, nearly seven and one-half per cent. The mechanic, or laboring-man, who, by industry and economy has accumulated a small store for the hour of need, can avail himself of this loan, only fifty dollars being necessary to secure a note. But a still greater inducement offered is the fact that the money proposed to be acquired will be used in quelling the hydra-headed monster, rebellion.

The Press, Public Ledger, and Inquirer, all joined their voices in the journalistic chorus over which Jay Cooke waved the baton of substantial blandishments. Under his direction the newspaper press of the North became for a time an indispensable adjunct to the bond business.

Such, then, in broad strokes was the picture of the daily American newspaper press in the middle of the nineteenth century. In the dependence of party machines and business enterprises upon public favor lay the hidden springs of editorial policy. Here was revealed the dynamics of American journalism.

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39 Ibid., September 23, 1861; cf. Oberholtzer, op. cit., I. 159-60.
40 Philadelphia North American, December 10, 1861; June 18, July 1, October 23, November 22, 1862; February 2, May 11, November 18, 1863; May 17, 1864; February 22, April 1, 1865.
41 Philadelphia Daily News, September 27, 1861; March 11, 1863.