
SOCIETY

Tenant farmers' children had little prospect of improving their lot. Needed as farm hands, they received little schooling. At the same time, the plenitude of cheap labor reduced farmers' incentives to invest in modern tractors, irrigation systems, and other technology. The result, in Tolnay's view, was an "ugly cycle" of rural poverty whose effects are still being felt today.

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Post-Mortem for Newspapers

"Why Newspapers Die" by David Skylar, in *The Quill* (July-Aug. 1984), 840 North Lake Shore Dr., Ste. 801W, Chicago, Ill. 60611.

During the past 35 years, 253 U.S. daily newspapers have ceased publication, and 145 have merged with other papers. During 1982 alone, the presses stopped at three major dailies—the *Philadelphia Bulletin*, the *Cleveland Press*, and the *Buffalo Courier-Express*.

"Television is killing newspapers," lament failing publishers. Nonsense, says Skylar, a consultant to the newspaper industry. He contends that bad management by top press executives is usually to blame. "Newspapers don't compete against TV at all," he maintains. "They compete for readers, who read, as opposed to watchers, who watch." (Only 20 percent of all households tune in to the TV evening news on any one day.) Publishers of magazines and books have expanded their audiences at least as quickly as the population has grown. Only newspapers have failed to keep pace. Between 1950 and 1980, while the U.S. population swelled by 70 million, newspapers won only 8.5 million new readers.

Skylar also disposes quickly of other common explanations for newspaper failures. One is that TV evening news broadcasts inevitably "scoop" afternoon papers, thereby dooming them to redundancy. Actually, 1,258 of the nation's 1,699 dailies hit the streets after noon, and most of them, while relatively small, are in good health.

Equally unconvincing to Skylar is the notion that newspapers face economic hard times. Overall, the business is "outrageously profitable," he says. The industry rings up \$18 billion in advertising revenues annually—equal to all radio and TV income combined. On top of that, publishers take in \$5 billion from newsstand and subscription sales.

Skylar believes that publicly owned newspaper chains (e.g., Gannett, Knight-Ridder, the New York Times Company), whose shares are traded on the stock markets, generally do better than their privately owned competitors. The reason: They "have sophisticated marketing management to cope with adverse conditions, to anticipate change. They constantly reinvest in their people and products." The Hearst, Scripps-Howard, and Newhouse chains, all privately held, have suffered more than their share of newspaper failures. Skylar accuses their top management of an "accountant mentality," of worrying more

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about their ledgers than about their readers.

Americans, better educated and more affluent than ever, are reading as never before. But they are not reading newspapers. The fault, in Skylar's view, lies squarely with editors and publishers who fail to realize that the literate public wants sophisticated, well-written newspapers, not bite-size bits of "TV-type news."

Creating the First Tabloids

"Problems of Class and Race in the Origins of the Mass Circulation Press" by Alexander Saxton, in *American Quarterly* (Summer 1984), 307 College Hall, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa. 19104.

In 1830, the United States could claim only 65 daily newspapers, all of them published by and for the urban gentry. Within just a few years, says Saxton, a University of California, Los Angeles, historian, a "favorable coincidence of technology, flush times, and politics" paved the way for a new breed of popular mass-circulation tabloids.

The pre-1830 "blanket sheets" measured 24 by 35 inches, unfolding to a grand four feet across—suitable for spreading out on a gentleman's library desk. They sold for six cents a copy, or \$10 a year, "the equivalent of a week's wage for a skilled journeyman," Saxton reports. The average "blanket sheet" had 1,200 subscribers.

The men who created the new "penny press" were, like many of their readers, skilled workers (mostly printers) caught up in the political ferment of the day—the rise of the egalitarian Workingmen's movement and the creation of the Jacksonian Democratic Party. An economic boom and the availability of inexpensive printing presses helped their cause.

The first successful mass-circulation paper was the *New York Sun*, launched in 1823 by a 23-year-old printer named Benjamin Day. Within a year, its circulation grew to 10,000. Soon to follow were the *New York Herald*, *Boston Daily Times*, and *Philadelphia Public Ledger*. Priced at one penny (\$3 annually), scaled down to a manageable 8½-by-11-inch format, the tabloids were hawked by street vendors. While the staid blanket sheets focused on commercial news fit for "men of affairs," the popular penny papers were brimful of crime, violence, humor, and sex. Sensationalism was not all they sold: The printer-editors lampooned the law courts for dealing harshly with striking workers and advocated shortening the 12-hour working day and better pay. They were strong supporters of President Andrew Jackson and his push for territorial expansion.

The economic depression of 1837 killed off many of the early dailies. Later, more penny papers were born. By 1850, 254 dailies were being published in the United States. Ironically, the broader markets created by the pioneers of the penny press required better printing presses and more efficient distribution systems than printer-editors could afford. It took \$5,000–10,000 to launch a new paper in 1840, \$100,000 in 1850. Publishing once again became a rich man's business.