

PRESS & TELEVISION

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.