Parallel Universes

PRINTED NEWS HAS ALWAYS MEANT more than just text on a folded page. Other formats occupy a parallel space to the newspaper, delivering information in different ways and filling different needs. In Japan, news was published for centuries via kwaraiban—broadsides that featured large illustrations of current events. Meanwhile, broadside ladis in Ireland and elsewhere fed the popular appetite for crime and punishment, telling of grisly murder and the executions of criminals in rhyming verses. Sometimes the news was local and personal, as when a Rhode Island clergyman found his hypocrisy exposed to the public in a broadside, and sometimes it had a national importance, like Thomas Paine’s Common Sense pamphlet. In most situations, these alternative genres were anonymously authored, modestly produced, and intended to be sold for pennies and then quickly discarded.

In this Case: Three Japanese kwaraiban (1800s-1880s); Six Irish broadside ballads (19th century); Thomas Paine, Common Sense (Newspaper, 1776); “Sports of Election!” broadside (1830); Two Sketches in Old English (1849), “Description of the Rise and Fall of a Clergyman” broadside (1826).

START THE PRESSES

TECHNOLOGY has always played a role in shaping the news we read, and the machines we use to record and publish the news have their own biases and predispositions. The output of industrial printing presses in the early 19th century matched a new industrialized appetite for the news, and the pages of penny newspapers told stories that were a far cry from those told to a limited, wealthy audience in a former age of handwritten newsletters delivered through the mail. Even people’s sense of what to expect images has changed through the decades: someone in the 20th century listing a home for sale or reading an account of a battle would expect unique images, rather than the stock cuts that satisfied earlier audiences.

In this Case: Quadruplicate Press” issue from the Baltimore American, The Revolution (October 29, 1860); La Epigrafia Mexicana (October & November, 1878); 8-of-a-piece newsprint a similar size (Morison, 1925); Heads and Bodies: For Use in the Study and Planning of Magazine and Newspaper Typography (Alphabetic Letter Company, [1904]); Specimen of Printing Types from the New England Type Foundery (Boston, 1834).

REPORT, ADVERTISE, DELIVER

The term “journalism” originated in the 1830s, but it was the backslackers of the early 20th-century Progressive Era who solidified the role of reporters as investigators speaking truth to power. Readers began to open their daily papers expecting information instead of just opinions. Meanwhile, print advertising strategies became more advanced, even if Madison Avenue advertising executives were still targeting the same impulses that street hawkers had been exploiting for centuries. The effects of more recent technological changes—from Craigslist’s appropriation of classifieds revenue to newspapers ecosystems created by Facebook and Google—have made the old models look more and more like a golden age that is gone forever.

In this Case: Ada Turbel, “The History of the Standard Oil Company,” McClure’s Magazine (November, 1902); Epitome Webster, The Young Reporter: Or, How to Write Short-Hand (1852); Report for a subscription to The Millenarian Soul (1786); Photograph of newsmen (1906); Portrait of “John Brecky, Fifty-Four Years the Canterbury News Carrier” (1846); Four pages of a broadside (19th century); Three postcards of the Providence Journal building (early 1900s); Advertising & Selling (August 1908).

The Changing Newspaper

The modern broadsheet newspaper may look old-fashioned in an age of screens, but it’s actually the culmination of four centuries of evolution by degrees, in format, appearance and content. Trends in newspaper titles have evolved as well, reflecting changing expectations for the news itself. An “Advertiser” is likely to have a very different outlook on the activities of industry and commerce than a “Sentinel,” “Intelligence,” “Spy” or “Scout.” The “Mercury,” “Dispatch” and “Express” will provide the news as quickly as possible, but will offer the well-rounded, sober analysis of “The Times.”

In this Case: The United States Chronicle (September 3, 1799); Manufacturer & Farmer’s Journal, Providence and Pawtucket Advertiser (March 2, 1820); The Micromon (March 23, 1827); Liberia Herald (June 6, 1830); The Patroitus: Sentinel (February 14, 1863); The Scourge (April 15, 1813).

FAKE NEWS!

It can feel like a phrase that belongs distinctly to our current moment, but it actually has been in use for over a century. The idea that our “first draft of history” might be a bad draft has been a source of anxiety for as long as there has been news to tell. We want to feel confident that our news isn’t “fake” because it shapes how we start and finish our days, how we understand what’s happening around us, and who we are. But our centuries-long history with the news suggests that “fake” is too blunt a term for the ways the news sometimes fails us.

This exhibition doesn’t attempt to tell a comprehensive history of journalism, or even the story of the print newspaper. Instead it offers a sense of the many ways the news can fail to do what we need it to do (a ship was too slow, a prank got out of hand, photography didn’t exist...), and how our expectations of what it need to do have changed. It presents news in the Rhode Island Historical Society, the John Carter Brown Library, the John Hay Library, Mary Murphy and the Rhode Island Historical Society, Russell Bellissimo, Ian Glidden, Ken Innes, Phoebe Bear, (1940s) Newspapers and Design Agency.

WAR & PROPAGANDA

Wartime reporting puts a special stress on the everyday conventions of journalism and brings the power structures behind the news to the forefront. For much of the history of printed journalism, newspapers explicitly represented political parties, and partisan press was the norm, so it was no great leap for a paper to become a mouthpiece for propaganda during times of war. But in the midst of cartage and darkness, journalism also provides an opportunity for the field to evolve. Wartime photography paved the way for modern photojournalism, and on battlefields around the world reporters have demonstrated tremendous bravery while attempting to inform readers.

In this Case: The Illustrated London News (December 5, 1863); Two Chinese stereos, depicting scenes from the Boxer Uprising (1900); Silver pitcher from a service produced by Gorham Manufacturing and engraved by Beulock of Providence (1843); Front and reverse (Berlin, May, 1844); Matthew Brady photography of members of the 2nd Regiment, Company F of The Rhode Island Volunteer (July 17, 1861); Two reproductions of photographs of Lyons Cross and war correspondent list of Lyons Cross, 1940s; From the Lyons Cross Papers, 1937-1946, Peabody Essex Museum Archives, Brown University Library, Special Collections.

HOAXES, LIES & BAD SCIENCE

Sometimes the first draft of history needs substantial revision, and there are as many different reasons for second drafts as there are bad news stories. Sometimes an innocent marketing ploy gets out of hand and a nation dreams of giant potatoes and winged men flying on the moon. Sometimes the cutting edge of science isn’t quite sharp enough yet. Occasionally a genuine villain uses the news to tell lies for profit. Sometimes a 20th-century mass media purveyed a falsehood, buying a press (or at least a copy machine) and distributing news on their own terms. From simple zines and newsletters to fully-fledged newspapers with circulation in the hundreds of thousands, alternative media responds to the evolving needs of specific communities of news readers.


Alternative Facts

A liebeld was already lamenting the consolidation of the newspaper industry in 1960 when he wrote, “Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one.” Many whose voices were excluded by the rise of the 20th-century mass media pursued that freedom, buying a press (or at least a