

# Copernicus at the Newsstand



In the face of more than a century of competition from all sorts of faster and more flexible media, the daily newspaper has proven remarkably enduring and resilient. Long after radio, film, television, electronic billboards, and the World Wide Web have diversified and accelerated the pace of official news transmissions, many Americans still regard the morning paper as an indispensable feature of public life. Just how deep this cultural attachment runs is difficult to assess, however, not least for those trying to nudge their way into the daily print business, an industry that has become exceptionally unwelcoming in recent decades.

The question of why people continue to be drawn to the ritual pleasures and symbolic associations of reading the daily paper may or may not have occurred to the people responsible for the well-funded reappearance of the *New York Sun* on New York newsstands 169 years after its original founding and a half century after its much-lamented demise. Since rising in April 2002, the *Sun* has faced an uphill battle to carve out a niche in a city where few residents can recall the era when dozens of papers (in several languages) jostled profitably for the daily attention of New Yorkers.

Weighing in at only twelve pages, the new daily has none of the reassuring heft of the major New York newspapers with which it seeks to compete, but in other respects the *Sun* is familiar, if a bit idiosyncratic. Small type and a

relatively large number of discrete articles on each page might incline some readers to suppose that they are consuming a headier journal than their neighbors on the subway. But a few minutes' perusal ought to dispel such feelings. Much of the *Sun's* news is drawn from wire services (this was especially true during the early weeks), and most of the articles written by the *Sun* staff adopt a similarly disembodied tone.



Fig. 1. Masthead for The Sun, May 7, 1838. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

The paper's patently conservative politics resemble those of the *New York Post*, though editor Seth Lipsky's extraordinary preoccupation with a few issues (terrorism, Israel, school vouchers) gives the new daily the kind of strident ideological focus more typically associated with a weekly magazine. Prominent and typical headlines announce that "NYPD Greets Muslims with Terror Ties," or delight in the specter of "Farrakhan Praying for Iraq." The word "appeasement" recurs with perverse and numbing frequency, invariably in reference to the Arab world. The only consistently light note on the front page is the regular appearance of a short item about a distressed member of the animal kingdom. When an AP story on an errant buffalo in Ulster County or a canine candidate for statewide office in Florida is not available, *Sun* reporters produce their own accounts of dogs rescued at sea or giant turtles recaptured by German police.

None of this, of course, is part of the paper's public self-perception, nor would such distinctions in typography and tone account for the founders' decision to rehabilitate an ancient and venerated player in the history of New York journalism. Press releases insist that the new *Sun's* distinctive mission is to give "a priority focus to the city it serves," and this turns out to be the larger significance of the name. While the masthead reaffirms the traditional motto, "it shines for all" (which the original editor had appropriated from a much older tavern sign from across the East River), emphasizing the democratic function of the newspaper as a source of illumination for the masses, advertisements for the new *Sun* opt for a more Copernican gloss. "Every issue revolves around New York," potential readers are reassured at the local newsstand.

Since there is relatively little room in this minipaper, as critics have pointed out, for serious coverage of life, politics, sports, entertainment, or anything else in what is still America's largest city, one must take the trope of heliocentrism as a symbolic statement about newspapers. The *Sun* may not have the resources to remedy the failure of the *Times* to devote adequate attention to its local base, but at least it will offer a lesson in journalistic

priorities. A newspaper, Seth Lipsky seems to be reminding us, ought to be about a great city.

Here, history is on Lipsky's side. The American daily print newspaper has always been metropolitan in character, and remains, even in its modern form, an artifact of urban life in the nineteenth century. Newspapers originated in early modern Europe as periodic merchants' letters, circulating information about prices, shipments, and commodities among far-flung commercial entrepôts. As journals attained greater regularity and wider readerships in eighteenth-century North America, they continued to be the exclusive property of cities, which had a near monopoly on printing presses and long-distance market activity.

These urban papers during the colonial and early national periods were still a far cry from the modern newspaper. They were expensive, sold mainly by annual subscription, and addressed to an elite readership of merchants and lawyers. In the nineteenth century, however, an altogether different species of daily journalism appeared. Spurred by the economic possibilities and the social needs created by massive population explosion in America's major urban centers, newspaper editors created an inexpensive product that would be sold in the streets by the issue, and could be supported by advertising. The new breed of paper focused on sensational stories about city life and trumpeted the value of a popular press as a bulwark of democracy.

Conventionally, historians date the advent of this era in modern print journalism with the arrival of the first issue of the penny press on September 2, 1833. On that day a twenty-three-year-old journeyman printer named Benjamin Day offered New Yorkers a paper called the *Sun*.

The *Sun's* mission was both simple and bold: "to lay before the public, at a price within the means of every one, ALL THE NEWS OF THE DAY, and at the same time afford an advantageous medium for advertising." This alternative newspaper invoked a public that included those without property and Day addressed his readers as a set of city dwellers rather than as fellow businessmen. Day's paper also looked different from what typically circulated in the coffeehouses and merchant exchanges. Like Lipsky's *Sun*, the first penny paper made a virtue of its reduced size, which was less than one third the height and width of the standard newspaper page—about one-fourth the size of the new *Sun*, and, at four pages, only a third as long.

Within a few months, Day's paper was the most popular in the city, and soon thereafter cheap dailies in Boston and Baltimore achieved similar distinctions. All told, dozens of penny dailies emerged in the immediate wake of the *Sun*, though most collapsed during the depression of 1837. A few of them survived to make a major imprint on the daily life of American cities, among them the *New York Herald* (1835), the *New York Tribune* (1841), and the *New York Times* (1851).

The original *New York Sun* initiated the era of mass journalism by pioneering

the economic model that continues to underwrite modern mass communications. If you can create a sufficiently popular, repeatable spectacle, you can sell the buying power of your spectators to advertisers at potentially limitless rates. Benjamin Day devoted considerable energy to staging this spectacle. For a week in 1835, Day printed a series of articles allegedly reprinted from a Scottish scientific journal, describing telescopic discoveries of life on the moon. As it turned out, these highly detailed reports of spherical amphibians, blue goats with single horns, two-legged beavers, and short hairy men with bat wings, were the handiwork of *Sun* reporter Richard Adams Locke. Still, by the time the Moon Hoax was exposed a couple of weeks later (Locke admitted as much to friend who wrote for a rival paper and the *Sun* coyly suggested the possibility that the story was a satire on local journalists), Day's circulation had soared to almost twenty thousand, making it in all likelihood the best-read daily newspaper in the world. Adopting a stance that would become more famously identified with P.T. Barnum, Day urged "every reader of the account [to] examine it, and enjoy his own opinion." He understood that for a daily paper each issue supersedes its predecessor. You could print the confessions of a murderer on Tuesday and call them bogus on Wednesday—collecting revenue on both items. You could sell the Moon Hoax one day and its retraction the next.

The following year saw Day at the forefront of the Helen Jewett controversy, as the brutal murder of a beautiful prostitute in New York became the cause célèbre of the young penny press and the model for a new focus on the city as an object of reportage. In covering the murder, New York's dailies articulated the now familiar view that important questions should be tried in the court of public opinion. The *Sun* was a leading voice calling for the conviction of Richard Robinson, a dry-goods clerk with wealthy connections, linked to Jewett's murder by a mountain of circumstantial evidence. After Robinson's acquittal (produced largely by a judge's instruction that the jury ought to disregard testimony of sex workers), a disappointed *Sun* declared that "a popular opinion formed upon a fair report of the trial in the public papers, is a solemn authority which every judicial functionary . . . is bound to respect."



Fig. 2. Masthead for The New York Sun

Day's naïve populism may sound quaint, but his equation of the popularity of the newspaper with the democratic nature of its function remains central to our notions of a free press. Over the course of the nineteenth century, freedom of the press shifted from an emphasis on the right of an editor to criticize the regime to an insistence on the right of an abstract readership to unimpeded access to information—the right, in other words, to live in a world where journalists are hard at work, perpetually casting light on the shadowy realms

of American life.

It's hard to see Seth Lipsky as a worthy successor to the populist, working-class entrepreneur who ran the *Sun* during the first five years of its existence before selling out to his brother-in-law. It is also hard to see what specific lessons the visionaries at the new *Sun* have drawn from its now classic eponym. The new *Sun's* putative local focus tends to use the city not as a canvas, but as a peephole through which to view national and international issues. The city council makes the front page, for example, primarily when it debates symbolic resolutions about the Middle East. And far from rendering the city as a mystery in need of unveiling, the *Sun's* interest in the peculiarities of urban life seems fairly muted. "Queens Democrats Live in Lawrence, L.I." is hardly the equivalent of a sensationalist murder story.

Finally, the new *Sun's* dependence on subsidies from patrons rather than high circulation aligns it more with the six-penny journals that Day's brash, pocket-sized paper eclipsed. Perhaps Lipsky and his supporters were more inspired by Day's postbellum successor, Charles A. Dana, whose conservative politics and stylistic simplicity find stronger echoes in today's *Sun*. More likely, however, the appeal of the *Sun* pedigree lies more in a vaguer nostalgia for a time when New Yorkers read multiple newspapers and held them proudly in public space as badges of political and ideological identity.

Should this newspaper fail, as it seems likely to do, perhaps an alternative nostalgia might be in order. The original *Sun* appeared not at the dawning of the last century in the heyday of Pulitzer and the Yellow Kid, but in a golden age of a different sort, when it cost very little to launch a daily newspaper. To call the 1830s a golden age is misleading, though, since the porthole of opportunity was really quite small. Benjamin Day began his paper in 1833 without any capital, relying on a slow, hand-cranked flatbed press. James G. Bennett claimed to have founded the rival *Herald* two years later with only \$500. By 1838, however the *Sun* (devalued after the Panic) sold for \$40,000. Thirteen years later, Henry Raymond's *New York Times* was launched with the support of \$100,000. By 1855, an informed observer estimated that twice that figure might be required to get a daily going in New York.

In the span of less than twenty years, then, New Yorkers demonstrated the potential profitability of a popular daily journal, creating applications and markets for advances in print technology and effectively raising the price of admission to the field. Newspapers became far more expensive to produce soon after they became far less expensive to consume. Since 1850, producing a mass daily has been an expensive proposition and an elite trade. Lipsky was certainly under no illusions on this score, attacking New York with an arsenal of \$20 million. But unlike Dana, Pulitzer, or William Randolph Hearst, he has to attract readers who may not be convinced that they need to read a daily print paper at all, let alone several.

The *Sun* has not released any circulation figures, and industry audits won't be

forthcoming for a few months, but the buzz around town is not optimistic. If they want to build a successful newspaper on nostalgia or on a New York-centered theory of the universe, the folks at the new *Sun* will probably need to think harder about why readers might want to see their city on the front page of a newspaper. For no obvious practical reason, newspapers continue, by and large, to be urban entities, their identities tightly tethered to particular cities of publication. *USA Today* stands alone in severing the link between the city and the daily paper, reminding mobile and deracinated readers in hotel lobbies and airport lounges all over the country that there is no inherent reason why daily print news ought to gravitate around a metropolis. As Lipsky's *Sun* seems poised to demonstrate, the link between cities and dailies may be simply a vestige of an earlier historical moment that has survived for no good reason into an era when most American readers live in suburbs or small cities and most of the news they read is of a regional or national character. The original penny papers built America's first mass medium around the possibilities and problems of urban environments. Attempts to claim their tradition inherit the burden of making new sense of that legacy.

**Further Reading:** See Frank M. O'Brien, *The Story of the Sun* (New York, 1918); Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States Through 250 Years, 1690 to 1940* (New York, 1941); Andie Tucher, *Froth and Scum: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium* (Chapel Hill, 1994); Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York, 1978); Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1980); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London, 1990).

This article originally appeared in issue 3.1 (October, 2002).

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