Tweet All About It

From "user-generated content" to political screeds, the future of news happens to look a lot like the past

BY CLIVE THOMPSON  illustration by Kotryna Zukauskaite
the globe, and a stand-alone app devoted entirely to hard news. Its video division, barely two years old, now accounts for half its views. And the site is heavily “social,” distributing its stories far and wide. People are more likely to encounter the material on Facebook or Snapchat than on BuzzFeed’s apps.

Is this what the future of news looks like? The landscape is changing dramatically, as traditional newspapers continue their advertising free-fall, while the growth is all online—from Facebook and Snapchat to celebrity sites like TMZ, the heavily partisan blogs of Daily Kos or Breitbart, or the Huffington Post’s platoons of unpaid scribes. Longtime newspaper fans worry that a civic apocalypse is afoot, as the “just the facts” style of last century’s papers morphs into a slurry of hot takes, tweets and six-second Vine videos. Will online media do the shoe-leather reporting that civil society requires?

It’s a complex, messy time. But there’s reason to hope that the future of news is bright. That’s because today’s world resembles nothing so much as the world of 300 years ago—when Americans began experimenting with a strange new media format: the newspaper.

Before newspapers came along, the only people who had regular access to news were the wealthy. Merchants would trade information via letters or buy encyclicals from expert scribes who compiled news from abroad. The idea that a mass public might want to read regularly published info didn’t arrive in America until the late 17th and early 18th centuries—when printers began crafting the first made-in-America papers.

If you saw them today, you’d barely recognize the form. They were tiny—usually no longer than four pages—and weren’t yet daily. They published weekly or even less often, in editions of a few hundred copies. There were no reporters. Printers were just technicians who managed the presses. To fill the pages, they leaned on their audience, who contributed letters, articles and essays. Indeed, early papers more resembled the “user-generated content” of the Huffington Post than today’s New York Times. Citizens opined on the legal system, composed poems advocating the rights of women or wrote up detailed instructions on how to self-inoculate against smallpox. This relatively open access to the press was useful for the independence cause: Revolutionaries like Sam Adams spread their ideas by submitting fiery essays to New England papers.

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end of his administration he loathed it. “The man who never looks into a newspaper is better informed than he who reads them,” he sighed.

Papers weren’t always profitable, or even often so. Readers failed to pay subscriptions; some journals died after only a few issues. One early financial lifeline was text-based ads, which read like Craigslist for a slaveholding public: “I wish to buy a few negroes, of both sexes, and will pay fair prices in cash,” one typical ad read. Citizens purchased ads to talk, in Twitteresque fashion, to the world. In 1751, William Beasley took out a Virginia Gazette classified to complain about his cheating wife—“I am really of [the] opinion she has lost her senses”—and warn people not to consort with her.

Benjamin Franklin was an avid ad-pitchman, using his sharp wit to craft ads for his customers. (One general was trying to convince citizens to donate horse carts to him; a Franklin-penned ad helped the general acquire over 200.) “He was the original ‘Mad Men,’” says Julie Hedgepeth Williams, a journalism professor at Samford University.

At first, printing newspapers was slow and arduous. Printers set wooden type, wet it with “deerskin balls” soaked in ink, then hung the printed copies up to dry. A two-man team could produce barely 250 pages an hour.

But newspapers were avid adopters of newfangled high-tech. In the early 1800s, they began using the “cylinder” press, which let them feed paper through ten times more quickly than before. And they were also among the first U.S. businesses to use steam power—which let them automate their presses, churning out copies faster than ever.

In essence, newspapers were cutting-edge pioneers of the industrial revolution—the Silicon Valley of their day. “One had to be an entrepreneur and one had to be very alert to new technologies,” notes Mitchell Stephens, a journalism professor at New York University and author of Beyond News: The Future of Journalism. “Nobody used the telegraph as much as newspapers did.” Years later, they were the first adopters of the telephone and linotype machine.

By the 1830s, those innovations cut the cost of printing so much that the “penny press” was born, a paper published daily and selling for one cent. Audience size boomed: Launched in 1833, the New York Sun started at 5,000 copies a day, growing to 15,000 in only two years. By the 1830s there were 1,200 papers across the country, and half of all families subscribed to one.

This changed the nature of journalism itself. To appeal to mass audiences, many newspapers dropped the nakedly partisan tone; they couldn’t be sure everyone agreed with their party stance. In place of the big political essays, papers hired reporters whose job was to collect facts. “You have a clear distinction between news and opinion that starts to happen,” Humphrey notes.

“The world has grown tired of preachers and sermons; to-day it asks for facts,” the reporter Clarence Darrow noted in 1894. Politicians were unsettled by these upstart reporters poking around and taking notes on their activities. When New York’s Tribune described the messy way an Ohio representative ate lunch and picked his teeth, the representative angrily passed a resolution banning Tribune reporters from the chambers.

Reporters invented an innovative newsgathering technique: Instead of merely reprinting politicians’ speeches, they’d ask questions and grill them. “The interview was an American invention,” notes Michael Schudson, a journalism professor at Columbia University. European papers didn’t do this; it seemed too impertinent to question authority so openly. But scrappy Americans had no such pieties. Indeed, as American reporters became more investigative, social critics got worried. “Our reporterized press,” complained Harper’s Magazine, “is often truculently reckless of privacy and decency.” Still, with the partisanship gone, others complained the writing was duller. “The rank and file tended to write like bookkeepers,” as a young reporter, H.L. Mencken, complained.

The explosive growth in advertising had an unexpected effect on how papers were designed. Up to the mid-19th century, papers were mostly a gray wall of text. Advertisers...
increasingly wanted their ads to stand out, though, so newspapers developed elegant ad design—with big dramatic fonts, illustrations and white space to catch the eye. Soon the profusion of ads became rather like the ads of today’s websites: an intrusive mess of scams that readers hated. “Some of our readers complain of the great number of patent medicines advertised in this paper,” the Boston Daily Times admitted.

But snazzy design was influential. By the mid-1800s, editors realized these techniques would help make news more appealing, too. They began running larger headlines and putting more graphics and maps into stories.

There was one population shut out from the newspaper boom, though: blacks. During slavery, American newspapers ignored blacks, except when they ran wild tales claiming they had poisoned their owners or committed burglaries. (Sections devoted to them were given names like “The Proceedings of the Rebellious Negroes.”) By 1827, a group of freed blacks decided to found their own newspaper, Freedom’s Journal. “We wish to plead our own cause,” they wrote in their first issue. “Too long have others spoken for us.” The black press was born, and soon there were dozens of black papers dotted across the country.

Getting their papers out required seat-of-the-pants ingenuity, even at the turn of the 20th century, because whites were often hostile to this upstart media. When Robert Abbott started the Chicago Defender in 1905, he found it hard to distribute in the South. “Once they realized it was out there, they tried to censor it—they’d arrest you if they saw you reading it, using vagrancy laws,” says Clint C. Wilson II, a journalism professor emeritus at Howard University. Shipments of the paper were thrown in the trash. To sneak the papers to Southern readers, Abbott convinced black porters on north-south trains to secretly ferry copies down.

This winter, the news site Quartz launched one of the most curious news apps ever: a chatbot. When you launch the Quartz app on your phone, it starts chatting with you—delivering the news as a series of text messages, with pictures or video embedded. It feels less like reading a paper than texting with a news-obsessed friend.

Cultural critics often bemoan today’s fragmented news landscape—but historians of newspapers are surprisingly optimistic about it. When they look at today’s explosion of news websites and apps, they see the same spirit of mad experimentation that created American news. As Jay Rosen, a journalism professor at New York University, points out, the period of the 1830s may be that 30 years from now, the ferment will have settled down—and we’ll have a new firmament of mainstream news organizations. As Buzzfeed co-founder Jonah Peretti points out, if you were alive in the 19th century, you wouldn’t have predicted the rise of the New York Times. It’s the same today.

“All these environments and experiments lead to forms that, at the time, nobody really knows where it’s going to head,” he says. “Lots of them fail.”

Though he believes BuzzFeed won’t be one of them. “I think, oh, Buzzfeed’s creating something new,” he says. This story is still being written.