Start Spreading the News

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Review of *The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know About Itself*. By Andrew Pettegree. Yale University Press. 445 pp. $35

In Italy, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, news gathering scribes began offering their services to subscribing customers. Relying on a web of contacts across Europe and the Ottoman Empire as sources, they delivered regular bulletins with information about politics and commerce. One of the best of them, Benedetto Dei, offered scores of items, each of them delivered in a crisp sentence, with a dateline and a neutral tone, to his rich and powerful clients. "I have news from Genoa," he wrote in 1478, "that the Doge has knighted Batistino and sent away the families of Adorni and Raonesi." At the trade fair in Lyon, Dei reported, "a lot of textiles have been sold and a good deal of money gained too."

Aided by the development of continental postal services, "avvisi" (manuscript news services), Andrew Pettegree tells us, remained largely unchanged into the eighteenth century. Newspapers owed a lot to their "conventions and news values."

In *The Invention of News*, Pettegree, a professor of modern history at the University of St. Andrews, and the author of *The Book in the Renaissance* (2010), provides a fascinating account of the gathering and dissemination of news from the end of the Middle Ages to the French Revolution, when the newspaper came of age. He reveals that centuries before the dawn of "the digital age," a "quiet incremental revolution" brought many citizens in Europe in far closer touch with neighboring cities, their capital, and other countries.

Pettegree does not compare news in the pre-industrial era with the multi-media world of the twenty-first century. But his richly detailed book invites us to do so -- and to reflect on the enduring challenges of establishing the news, "as its admirers would once have seen it, as an instrument of empowerment and emancipation."
Fundamentally, of course, news "agencies," then and now, have struggled to establish themselves as worthy of the public trust. Because it can make or break fortunes (to those who buy grain -- or stocks -- before or after they shoot up in price) and prop up or bring down governments, timely news is precious. Even though it is often difficult to verify.

To preserve their reputations as authoritative disseminators of information and avoid the retribution that might follow "overbold commentary," Pettegree writes, the first generations of newspapers offered strands of information or verbatim accounts "in what must have seemed like random pieces from a jigsaw, and an incomplete jigsaw at that." And they steered clear of "interpolations that would actually have assisted their readers in following the news." In the late eighteenth century, however, editors and publishers noticed that the public voted with their purses, preferring to get information and opinion from partisan political pamphlets rather than cautious dailies and weeklies.

Despite the hazards, Pettegree notes, merchants "were assiduous collectors of rumor." And the medieval tradition that word of mouth was more trustworthy than written reports died slowly. He does not need to remind us that on the internet rumors, to say nothing of outright falsehoods, are fruitful and multiply.

Newspapers gained traction, Pettegree concludes, by ridding themselves "of many of the chaste virtues" that characterized their entry into the news business. Plunging headlong into partisan conflicts and revolutions, advocacy journalism engaged the interest of an expanding public. That said, Pettegree recognizes that dissolving the distinction between news and opinion "came at a cost." Politicians wished to control newspapers; and journalists "were not always unhappy to be controlled."

Over time, and perhaps, inevitably, the conflation, actual and perceived, between news and opinion, influenced by a concerted right wing assault on the "liberal" press and by the postmodern attack on objectivity, undermined public trust in established media. Exit Walter Cronkite -- and lots of newspapers. Enter Fox News, Matt Drudge, MSNBC, and The Huffington Post. And, of course, the new cultures and structures of what Cass Sunstein calls "republic.com" hold sway at the very time that controlling, shaping, and manipulating information have become universally acknowledged as essential attributes of power.

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