

NEWSPAPERS

From "Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History"



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Newspapers played a pivotal role in the Civil War, even more so than they had in the American Revolution. From agitating for or against slavery to reporting battlefield details, they served as lightning rods for public opinion as they informed both governmental leaders such as Abraham Lincoln and citizens. In the process, they changed forever as they covered the greatest news story in American history, the Civil War.

Mainly white abolitionists made diligent use of newspapers beginning in the 1830s to agitate for an end to slavery. William Lloyd Garrison's **The Liberator** never had more than 3,000 subscribers, but his fanaticism created the most violent public reaction since the Revolution. A one-time Presbyterian minister named Elijah Lovejoy became the first American journalist to be murdered when he was killed by a mob opposed to his St. Louis **Observer** in 1837. White abolitionists like Garrison and Lovejoy were aided by African-American slavery opponents, including Frederick Douglass, whose **North Star**, which was first published in 1847 and continued as **Frederick Douglass' Paper** into the 1860s. Other, less literate blacks used the power of the spoken word to advocate an end to the holocaust of slavery.



A newspaper vendor in camp near Meade, Virginia, November 1863

(Photograph by Alexander Gardner / **Library of Congress**)



The **New York Herald**'s wagon in the field near Bealton, Virginia, August 1863

(Photograph by Timothy H. O'Sullivan / **Library of Congress**)

Technological improvements, an increase in literacy, and changing attitudes toward democratic participation inspired the invention of the first mass medium, the penny newspaper press, in antebellum America. By 1852, Horace Greeley's penny-press **New York Tribune** had a circulation of more than 200,000. The antislavery **Tribune** helped inspire the Republican Party and supported Abraham Lincoln for president in 1860. During the war, certain **Tribune** editorials were rightly or wrongly accepted as Lincoln's own pronouncements. The **Chicago Tribune**, edited by fellow Republican and abolitionist Joseph Medill, joined Greeley's **Tribune** in supporting the Republican cause during the 1850s. The **Chicago Tribune** was one of the earliest supporters of Lincoln and helped popularize the Illinois politician by reporting and reproducing his speeches. A one-time Greeley employee, Henry Raymond, made the **New York Times** a firm Lincoln supporter and a reliable chronicler of the war. Other influential Northern newspapers included the **New York Evening Post** and the **Springfield (Massachusetts) Republican**.

The antebellum South produced counterparts to Northern abolitionist editors in the form of "fire-eaters," newspapermen such as Robert Barnwell Rhett and Edmund Ruffin. Restricted by state laws that prohibited newspapers from advocating abolitionism for fear of slave riots, Rhett was a tireless and indomitable Southern patriot who was called the "father of secession." His **Charleston Mercury** declared for separation from the North as early as 1832. Ruffin wrote for Rhett, including "The Political Economy of Slavery," which argued that blacks were genetically inferior, that government should be by and for the elites only, and that secession was the only way to preserve the "glories of an independent South." Ruffin committed suicide rather than take the oath of allegiance after Appomattox. **De Bow's Review**, started in 1846 by James De Bow, was a vigorous defender of the South and slavery. The South had no newspapers to compare to the **New York Tribune**. The largest circulating newspaper in the South at the time of the war was the **Richmond Dispatch**, with a daily readership of 8,000.

There was newspaper opposition to the Civil War and President Lincoln in the North as well. The penny press **New York Herald** argued against the war until at least 1862. Editor James Gordon Bennett sided with the South on the states' rights issue. Few presidents suffered more editorial abuse than Lincoln did. Newspapers such as the **La Crosse (Wisconsin) Democrat** called Lincoln a murderer and instigated for his assassination. General Ambrose Burnside suspended the **Chicago Times** from publication in June 1863 when editor Wilbur F. Storey used violent language to attack Lincoln for the Emancipation Proclamation. Lincoln rescinded the order when he learned about it three days later. The **New York World** and **Journal of Commerce** were suppressed for two days in May 1864 by General John A. Dix for publishing a forged presidential proclamation. Samuel Medary, editor of the Columbus, Ohio-based **Crisis** and **Ohio**

Statesman, was indicted for subversive activities by a federal grand jury in 1864 but died before his case could be tried.

Climbing circulation and increasing advertising revenues allowed extensive war coverage in metropolitan Northern newspapers. The Civil War was one of the first wars in which the telegraph was used to transmit stories, allowing editors to provide up-to-date information in “extra” editions. The **New York Herald**, which featured the most aggressive war coverage, spent as much as \$1,000 for the telegraphed account of the capture of New Orleans, a substantial amount at the time. More than 200 full-time correspondents on both sides dodged bullets, generals, and military censors to report the war. They also covered the war from the political capitals of Washington, D.C., and Richmond, Virginia. One female correspondent, Jane Grey Swisshelm, reported on the conditions of Union hospitals in Washington, D.C. Artists and photographers roamed the fronts, providing the first visual war reporting. Technological limitations did not permit the publication of actual photographs, but photographers such as Mathew Brady sold their work to the public through stores. Engravings based on photographs were common in weekly publications such as **Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper** and **Harper’s Weekly**, as were detailed maps and other graphical aids. The maps, with their detailed battlefield information, posed a previously unknown security problem, especially since newspapers could and did fall into enemy hands during times of rapidly changing troop positions.

The Civil War changed American journalism forever. The idea of immediate reporting had been born with the invention of the telegraph in the 1840s but became commonplace during the war. A reading public that had previously tolerated war dispatches that were weeks or even months old began to demand immediate information. News writing, which often imitated ornate spoken rhetoric before the war, became better organized, more concise, and easier to read. The Civil War posed new questions about the people’s right to know, the need to protect sensitive military information, and even the right to criticize government leaders during wartime. And American Civil War newspaper coverage began to change forever how democracies viewed war. On-the-scene reporting and visual coverage, especially photographs, turned war from a romanticized or otherwise idealized dispute between gentlemen into the dirty, ugly, and deadly middle and lower class reality that it had become.

See also

Bennett, James Gordon; Charleston Mercury; Chicago Tribune; Civil Liberties, U.S.A.; De Bow, James Dunwoody Brownson; De Bow’s Review; Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper; Greeley, Horace; Harper’s Weekly; Medill, Joseph; New York Times; New York Tribune; Photography; Raymond, Henry; Reid, Whitelaw; Richardson, Albert Deane; Richmond Examiner; Richmond Whig; Smalley, George W.; Telegraph; Villard, Henry; War Correspondents.

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