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## News and Literacy— The First Story That Comes to Hand

Early in this century, a divorce among members of the Khasi tribe in India would be announced by a crier walking through the village:

*Kaw*—hear, O villagers, that U\_\_\_\_ and K\_\_\_\_ have become separated in the presence of elders. *Hei!* thou, O young man, canst go and make love to K\_\_\_\_ for she is now unmarried, and thou, oh spinster, canst make love to U\_\_\_\_. *Hei!* there is no let or hindrance from henceforth.<sup>2</sup>

Cicero, the Roman philosopher and politician, was informed of similar news in the year 50 B.C. through a letter written by a friend and a fellow politician, Caelius:

Paulla Valeria, the sister of Triarius, has divorced her husband without assigning any reason, on the very day that he was to arrive from his province. She is going to marry D. Brutus. She had sent back her whole wardrobe.<sup>3</sup>

A gulf separates these two reports. One, relying on easily memorizable formulas, relates the information in the most personal, the most concrete terms: “. . . thou, O young man, canst go and make love to K\_\_\_\_. . . .” The other—although it is addressed to one individual, not a whole village—is impersonal, dispassionate (even ironic), and halfheartedly analytical. (Caelius notes that no explanation was provided but presents the wardrobe as a possible clue to the woman’s thinking.) Among the many factors that might explain the palpable difference in mentality between this village crier and this Roman politician, one stands out: literacy.

Writing, because of its implications for the development of human thought, deserves a share of the byline on our civilization. With the ability to note, to record, the mind is freed from the burden of memorizing past wisdom. Formulas cease some of their hold on language and thought. And with the store of wisdom no longer limited to the capacity of a generation’s memory, knowledge begins to ac-

*So little pains do the vulgar take in the investigation of truth, accepting readily the first story that comes to hand.*

—Thucydides<sup>1</sup>



## How Will Television, Like Writing, Change Us?

Writing changed the way human beings thought. The arrival of the printing press in Europe in the 15th century did, too (see Chapter 7). Can we expect television and related modern technologies to work similar changes upon us?

Scholars, media critics and most of the rest of us have been looking for evidence of television's effects almost since it was first invented. Has it made us more violent? Less social? More like preliterate people? Less serious? More materialistic?

A lesson from the history of communication: It takes time for a new information technology to develop the forms that will unleash its power. Their alphabet was more than two centuries old before the Greeks jotted down the first histories and philosophies. More than a century passed after Gutenberg invented the printing press be-

fore the first novels and newspapers appeared. Yes, things seem to move faster now. Nevertheless, it is likely that we haven't yet seen all that television can do; it is likely that the forms—the programming—that will make best use of this medium have not yet appeared.

Television is a revolutionary technology, as writing and the printing press were, but the television revolution is still very young. The consequences of television viewing (most of them negative) pounced on by its critics so far may prove to have been products only of its immature years.

It would have been unwise to judge the consequences of writing before Herodotus and Plato. We may be making a similar mistake with television.

cumulate over the generations—Cicero could read, and presumably build upon, the work, for example, of Thucydides. Furthermore, once words and ideas are impressed on clay tablets or jotted down on paper, they gain weight; they can be studied independently of the objects to which they refer; they can be compared, juggled, rearranged. Thoughts, once written down, can more easily be rethought.

Researchers such as anthropologist Jack Goody and Walter Ong, a professor of humanities, have concluded that the literate see the world differently from the way the preliterate do. In an oral society, the question of whether, for example, the dew is a thing of the sky or of the earth would seem pointless, nonsensical. What in their world might occasion such a distinction? But the literate compile lists, and because dew cannot be placed in both columns, the various attributes of dew, sky and earth must all be considered.<sup>4</sup> Among the outgrowths of such exercises in abstract reasoning is a flowering of cognitive skills, including the ability to categorize and analyze. The literate can separate themselves from words and therefore from situations; they can stand back and mull them over. We owe science, and the myriad technological wonders it has spawned, to writing—this most revolutionary of technologies.<sup>5</sup>

News could not escape the effects of this transformation in thought processes. Although formulas are too convenient for even the most literate of journalists to surrender



entirely, the literate mind was able to recast them, settling on formulas with attributes other than ease of memorization. News could, for example, be topped with headings giving the place and date of its origin or a summary of its contents, and it could be arranged or presented chronologically, by location or according to a quality as abstract as its "newsworthiness." Preliterate societies seem to employ the same basic standards of newsworthiness used by modern news organizations; nevertheless, the process of *explicitly* rating and organizing occurrences according to some imposed hierarchy of newsworthiness—deaths before injuries; six-column headline for earthquake, one column for fire—appears to be a construct of the literate mind.

And broader changes in the nature of news can also be attributed to writing. Caelius and other literate newsmongers owed their predilection for dispassion and analysis in part to their literacy, to the objectification of language and, consequently, of thought that writing provides. Indeed, the gradual switch over the centuries from reliance on spoken news to the use of the written word to transmit news may have contributed to the modern journalist's proclaimed allegiance to objectivity.<sup>6</sup>

Reading and writing, of course, did not immediately work their magic on all segments of the population. Cicero and Caelius are hardly representative of Roman society; Rome appears to have had its criers.<sup>7</sup> The transformations took centuries, millennia, to take hold. Literacy spread, among the upper classes at least, with the efficient alphabet and primary schools of Greece and Rome, but it declined again during the Middle Ages.<sup>8</sup>

And news was particularly slow to feel the full force of the literate mind, because writing, unaided by the printing press, is a poor news medium.

## The Demands of News

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The ability to speak is part of our genetic inheritance; the ability to write is not. Writing, perfected relatively late in the development of the species, is a craft that must be taught to each new generation.<sup>9</sup>

The oldest surviving evidences of a writing system are the pictorial symbols for words impressed on a collection of clay tablets from about the year 3100 B.C. There is no reason to believe that these tablets, produced in Uruk in Mesopotamia, were put to any journalistic uses. Indeed they do not seem to have been put to any literary uses—the tablets are covered with lists of commodities and records of transactions.<sup>10</sup> (Commerce, not art, appears to have spurred the development of this preeminent intellectual tool.)

Greater efficiency in writing was achieved with greater separation between symbol and object. In the cuneiform script developed by the Sumerians in Mesopotamia, the symbols became easier to draw—more abstract—and pronunciations, not just objects, began to be represented. Cuneiform tablets dating from the middle of the third millennium B.C. in Mesopotamia and what is now Syria are still concerned primarily with matters of commerce—lists of possessions and agricultural records. But some of those tablets feature school texts, some fragments appear to have been used for literary works and some record the texts of state treaties.<sup>11</sup>

Newspapers today will occasionally reprint the exact wording of treaties. Might these treaties, written in cuneiform characters on clay tablets 2,500 years before the birth



of Christ, have functioned as a form of written news? Probably not. Words are entrusted to hard surfaces to give them permanence. When a state treaty was recorded in clay, its terms were protected against the distortions, convenient or otherwise, of individual memories. But writing's permanence, although it can be crucial for governance and law, is of much less value for news.

The written word, through its ability to last, can preserve the past and regulate the future. Journalism, however, is concerned with the present, and writing had a great deal of difficulty keeping up with the present. Perhaps a clay tablet might have contained the first public mention of a treaty that had otherwise been kept secret. But in normal circumstances, why would leaders wait for the clay tablet to spread news of a treaty? Why would they not simply announce it and talk about it? Why would their subjects not simply ask? News moves fast, and writing is slow. It takes time to form words on soft clay. In a village or small city, most occurrences will be discussed well before they are recorded.

A group of tablets written in a cuneiform script in the 15th or 14th century B.C., about a thousand years after those treaties, discusses a topic even more familiar to modern newspaper readers: official corruption. The tablets display a series of charges against the mayor, named Kushiharbe, of the town of Nuzu in Mesopotamia. He is accused primarily of thefts and extortion: "So declares Ninuari: 'Kushiharbe robbed me from my own storehouse. Two shekels of gold, one ox, and two rams I paid to Kushiharbe; then he restored to me (what he had stolen).'" But an additional charge was also leveled against this mayor: that he had had illicit intercourse with a married woman named Humerelli. Apparently mindful of the need for impartiality, the writer of the tablets includes not only the damaging testimony of Palteya, who says he procured the woman for the mayor, but Kushiharbe's response to the charges: "I swear that Palteya did not bring Humerelli to the trysting house of Tilunnaya, nor did I have intercourse with her!"<sup>12</sup>

Although this record of charges against a mayor from the second millennium B.C. resembles a modern report on a trial or even a work of investigative journalism, again it is hard to imagine that the tablets played much more than an ancillary role in spreading word of Kushiharbe's alleged crimes through Nuzu. Perhaps a traveler who had missed all the local scuttlebutt on Mayor Kushiharbe might have learned the news by reading the tablets, but to conclude that the tablets were responsible for informing the city's residents of the news, we would have to assume that the abundant evidence of their mayor's rapaciousness had not been discussed well before the scribe had been instructed, the cuneiform had been drawn, the clay had dried and the tablet had been displayed. (Certainly, this news would have been widely discussed at the time of Kushiharbe's trial; trials were conducted in public.)

The great strength of writings such as these is the stable and secure home they provide for words, but an item of news is transient. It passes through a community for a few days, then it is gone. A medium that enables a report to settle in for an extended visit threatens to change its nature, to encumber that report with added legal or historical responsibilities.

The extra weight the written word carries does have some value for news. The charges against Kushiharbe must have commanded more respect on clay tablets than they did as chatter in the marketplace. Even if the townspeople found the information on



these tablets redundant, the tablets may have played a role, for those able to read them, in confirming reports of the mayor's crimes. If redundant information can be news, perhaps these tablets qualify. But their primary function seems more likely to have been legal or historical than journalistic.

The final step in the development of writing was the adoption of an alphabet. An alphabet without vowels was used by the Canaanites in Syria and Palestine by 1500 B.C.<sup>13</sup> The Greeks contributed vowels about 750 years later—creating the alphabet still used, with modifications, in Europe and many of its former colonies today.<sup>14</sup>

A slower medium can play a more significant role in disseminating news if it can reach a larger audience. (This is the explanation for the great success of the printing press.) But here, too, writing, even with the assistance of the Greek alphabet, fell short. As early as the seventh century B.C., Greeks published laws and decrees by inscribing them on the walls of public buildings or on *stelae*—slabs of stone or wood that were displayed in public places.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, Greek leaders could better maintain their rule by having their decrees writ in stone or wood, but it seems unlikely that these inscriptions actually spread news to as large an audience as could be reached by simply announcing the treaties or decrees and allowing the normal flow of conversations in public places to carry word to the rest of the populace.

The audience that could be reached by an inscription on stone or wood was restricted, in any case, by the severe limitations in literacy that persisted until the fifth century B.C. in Greece and much longer in the rest of the world.<sup>16</sup> Virtually all healthy humans are able to hear news; the potential audience for written news has never been quite that large.

## News and History

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It is axiomatic in journalism that the fastest medium with the largest potential audience will disseminate the bulk of a community's breaking news. Today that race is being won by broadcasting and the Internet. Consequently, daily newspapers are beginning to underplay breaking news about yesterday's events (already old news to much of their audience) in favor of more analytical perspectives on those events.<sup>17</sup> In other words, dailies are now moving in the direction toward which weeklies retreated when dailies were introduced. As the use of writing advanced over the centuries, writers began taking a similar route. Condemned to being scooped on so much current information by word of mouth, they adopted more analytical approaches to the world, contenting themselves with recording, if not inventing, literature, philosophy, science and, of course, history.

When Herodotus put pen to papyrus (in the last half of the fifth century B.C.), it was to write not news about the present but history about the past (the wars between Greece and Persia in the first half of that century) for the use of the future: "that time may not draw the color from what man has brought into being. . . ."<sup>18</sup>

Another great Greek writer of nonfiction prose, Thucydides, did in fact write about the events of his lifetime (the Peloponnesian War of the second half of the fifth century);



however, his writing was slow, painstaking, deeply analytical. There is no evidence that it was circulated to or even intended for contemporaries. "I have written my work, not as an essay to win the applause of the moment," Thucydides explains, "but as a possession for all time."<sup>19</sup> News lives for the moment and its applause.

In Thucydides' writing we can glimpse what a mind invigorated by literacy can accomplish, but Thucydides was not writing, and probably could not have written, news. Aside from the difficulties the handwritten word had in capturing the news, the expectations Thucydides had for his words would have made it impossible even to attempt such a chase. When Thucydides died, probably shortly after Athens' final defeat in the Peloponnesian War (404 B.C.), he had yet to write about the last six and a half years of the war.

The difference between news and history, or other attempts at a deeper analysis, can be found in those six and a half years and in the attitude of a writer like Thucydides. History exists, in part, as a rebuke to the shortsightedness, the superficiality, the frenzy of news—as a critique of "the first story that comes to hand."

Writing was for tortoises such as Thucydides; news is spread by hares. News of the Peloponnesian War—undoubtedly lacking the certainty for which Thucydides strove, undoubtedly lacking his broad perspective, but six and a half years more current—circulated not in writings on stone or papyrus, but in speeches and conversations.

Socrates, a contemporary of Thucydides, was capable of playing the hare. According to Plato's *Charmides*, after Socrates returned from service as a foot soldier in the Athenian struggle to take Potidaea—one of the initial battles of the Peloponnesian War—he stopped by a gymnasium to talk and, inevitably, exchange news. Socrates wanted to be brought up to date on the current state of philosophy (a form of specialized news) and on young men of remarkable wisdom or beauty. His own contribution to this discussion was "news" from the army—Socrates' acquaintances at the gymnasium requested "a complete account."<sup>20</sup>

The minds of those who participated in such discussions in Greece in the fifth century B.C. undoubtedly were affected by the rapid growth of literacy. Certainly, there is large distance between the war report that must have been contributed by Socrates and that produced by an Abipon messenger with his "infinite exaggeration" of his comrades' conquests. Socrates spoke without the benefit of the time for research, reflection, and analysis possessed by Thucydides when he wrote; yet unlike the Abipon messenger he was predisposed toward detachment and truth. In a society literate enough to produce a Thucydides and a Socrates, spoken news must often have been exchanged less agonistically, with less of a weakness for the fabulous. Under the influence of literacy, news may have taken a hesitant first step on the long, perhaps endless, road toward objectivity.

Still, this indirect effect was virtually the only effect writing had on the exchange of news at this time, even in Athens. Writing would not be able to compete directly with word of mouth as a news medium until a new element was added to the competition: a pressing need to move news regularly over vast distances. And that would require societies spread over vast distances.