

Notes on “Corruption and the Press”
(a progress report on a paper that began 3 weeks ago)

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July 11, 2003

Information is vital to a well functioning democracy just as it is to an economy. We explore the role of a free, often independent, and increasingly competitive and widespread press in rooting out corrupt practices at all levels of government throughout U.S. history.

Mass Circulation and the Growth of the Independent Press

Although freedom of the press is guaranteed by the first amendment, the other features just mentioned—mass circulation, independence, and a highly competitive press—came much later in our history. Mass circulation of newspapers was made possible by a series of technological innovations that cheapened inputs, such as newsprint, and vastly increased the scale of printing operations.¹ The independence of the press, a less well defined concept, arose in the early nineteenth century, spread somewhat slowly at first, and then diffused more rapidly in the latter half of the century.

Mass circulation and the independence of the press diffused together in the nineteenth century. In 1830 just a handful of presses would have been labeled independent. Newspapers were relatively expensive items. The yearly subscription of from \$8 to \$10 was about one week’s earnings for an artisan (artisans earned \$1.73/day in 1830, and greatly exceeded a week’s earnings for a laborer.² Circulation, moreover, was generally by subscription and was, not surprisingly, rather meager on a per capita basis. In 1850 the relative cost of the news was lower, circulation had increased, but the vast majority of presses were still closely identified with a political party. The earliest data that indicate party affiliation are from the 1850 Population Census of Social Statistics and reveal that about 85 percent of newspapers in 1850 had party affiliation. Both circulation and political independence would change substantially after the Civil War.

We have assembled a panel data set of all urban dailies for 1870, 1880, 1890, 1900, and 1910 that includes the largest 100 cities in 1910 (also the largest 100 in 1870). The information includes affiliation, circulation, subscription rate, year established, number of pages, square inches, and language. These data demonstrate the rise of mass circulation and the independent (and competitive) press. [To be added: Tables on the rise of mass circulation and the independent press in the largest US cities from 1870 to 1910 using Ayer (various years)]

¹ Widespread literacy is also an important prerequisite. But for most groups in the United States that requirement was filled early in our history.

² Subscription rates are from Mott 1962 [orig. pub. 1941]), p. 203. Artisan and laborer wage rates are from *Historical Statistics* 1975, D715 and 716.

In 1910 the nation's largest 100 cities, with their 552 daily newspapers, had a combined daily circulation of 16.6 million, or 0.69 papers per capita.³ Mass circulation had been achieved. Of the 458 "political" dailies in these cities, 53 percent were listed as independent in affiliation (or independent with a leaning toward one or the other major party) and they had 54 percent of all "political" newspaper circulation.

No single innovation led to the rise of the mass-market newspaper.⁴ Rather, the shift was due to a host of interrelated innovations. Almost all of the changes, it is important to note, were unrelated to the urban, state, and federal scandals that they eventually affected. The innovations include the Fourdrinier paper making process (c. 1830; invented in 1806), the use of wood pulp in paper (1870s), the bleaching of paper, steam power press operation (New York *Sun* installed steam in 1835), cylindrical presses (1830s), rotary presses (1847, Hoe's "lightning" press), the typewriter (c.1880; invented in 1860s by C.L. Sholes, once an editor of the Milwaukee *Sentinel*), and the linotype (1890s) and monotype processes. (Most dates given refer to general commercial use.)

A host of transport and communications innovations hastened the flow of information, including the pony express, steamship, telegraph, transatlantic cable, telephone, and wire news service (the Associated Press was established in 1848). The organization of the industry also changed with the addition, and then expansion, of the foot soldiers of the news—reporters.

Most histories of the U.S. newspaper industry accept the notion that virtually all presses before the Civil War were aligned with a political party. Some were directly supported by the party, whereas others gained from patronage positions such as postmaster, and contracts with the government to print materials. Newspapers were often established by a political candidate and they also received direct funding from the national party.

Many of the pre-Civil War presses were bully-pulpits for political bosses. Take Thurlow Weed for example. He apprenticed as a printer, worked for the *Rochester Telegraph*, and then bought the newspaper, which he used to support his candidates. He soon set his sights higher and took charge of the *Albany Evening Journal*, a Whig party paper backed by the Anti-Masonic party. He used the paper to support Seward for New York State governor in 1838, and together with another well-known editor, Horace Greeley, he successfully worked to elect President Harrison in 1840 (Emery 1972 [orig. pub. 1954]).

Exactly why a greater fraction of newspapers became independent from 1850 to 1900 has been the subject of a large and conflicting literature (see, for example, Cook 1998, Hamilton 2001). Most agree that the technological changes that lowered the price of newsprint (e.g.,

³ Circulation numbers are largely estimated and are likely to be overstated. But because the population numbers include children, the upward bias in the numerator is likely to be overbalanced by the greatly overstated denominator. Data were collected from N. W. Ayer (various years), a manual for advertisers. Note that 11 percent of all "political" newspapers did not list a circulation, thus understating the estimated circulation for the newspapers listed.

⁴ See Emery (1972 [orig. pub. 1954]), for example, on technological changes and the press. The existence of mass literacy, of course, was a pre-condition for the mass-market newspapers and the burgeoning foreign language press was also of great importance.

Fourdrinier paper making process, use of wood pulp paper) and that increased scale economies of printing newspapers (e.g., cylindrical roller printing, steam power, linotype machines) were paramount to the growth of mass market and independent newspapers. Reinforcing these economic changes and adding to the production economies of scale was an increase in the news content of papers and the use of reporters to gather it. The insistence on investigative reporting—“news” and not rewritten text—was a legacy of the Civil War, deemed the most closely and intensely covered war in American history. But it was also due to the telegraph and other forms of rapid transit and communication that enabled papers to get news and, if their reporters were clever, to get it first.

The technological innovations on the printing side and the increased use of reporters served to create large economies of scale in newspaper publishing. Some have linked increased scale to the growth of the independent press since a move to the center of the political distribution would increase demand, as in the classic Hotelling model. But mass circulation was spurred not just by cheap newspapers. Mass circulation also came about because of a fundamental change in the content of newspapers and a shift from the serious and often boring business of politics to a wider range of stories and features that had mass appeal. Independent presses arose for that reason as well.

The political independence of the press may not have been as important as the financial independence of the press. Few newspapers before 1830 did not have some financial connection to a political party or a political office holder or office seeker.⁵ Independence may have been an outgrowth of increased advertising revenues that enabled papers to break their ties with political parties and office seekers.

The appearance of an independent press—or at least one that was financially independent and intent on telling the truth—was probably a critical element in rooting out and fighting corruption. The independent press was not, of course, ideologically neutral. Similarly, the aligned presses did not always twist the truth for the party. The so-called aligned presses were often those that broke the news, exposed scandal, and garnered a reputation for truth and honesty. Competition among the various presses in a city, rather than the existence of an independent press, may have mattered most in exposing and rooting out corruption.

Consider, for example, the campaign against Tweed and Tammany Hall launched in 1871 by the *New York Times* and *Harper's Weekly*. Investigative reporting on Tammany contracts by the *Times* gave New Yorkers the facts. Thomas Nast's cartoons for *Harper's* captured their imagination. Together they brought down Tammany Hall. In the process, lives were risked; editors were bribed and threatened. (Tammany even canceled *Harper & Brothers* textbook contract—retaliation taken seriously by the parent company but not by *Harper's*.) The public was won over. David had slain Goliath. But one of the Davids in the story was not an independent press, for the *New York Times* was Republican.

⁵ According to Cook (1998) political parties financed the press through direct patronage (e.g., printing contracts) before the 1830s. Although the government was initially a “sponsor” of the press, it later “subsidized” it through low postal rates. On political subsidies and when the independent press emerged (1830s or 1870s), see also Kaplan (1993).

Similarly, the New York *World*, perhaps the most successful of all nineteenth century newspapers, was a Democratic press. When Joseph Pulitzer took over the *World* in the early 1880s he wrote: “There is room in this great and growing city for a journal that is not only cheap but bright ... dedicated to the cause of the people rather than to that of the purse potentates ... that will expose all fraud and sham, fight all public evils and abuses ... In that cause and for that end solely the new *World* is hereby enlisted and committed to the attention of the intelligent public” (Mott 1962, p. 434).

Pulitzer’s earlier venture, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, was an independent newspaper. Soon after he purchased it in 1878 the paper exposed wealthy citizens of St. Louis who evaded taxes. It challenged “the granting of an extortionate franchise to a public utility corporation” and it “warred constantly for three years to break up a police-protected gambling ring.” “It poured editorial fire on crooked politicians” (Emery 1972 [orig. pub. 1954], p. 311).

The *New York Sun*, under the editorial leadership of Charles Dana, was another independent newspaper with a flair for breaking stories. On the eve of the 1872 presidential campaign that elected Grant, the *Sun* broke the news about a scheme later to be known as *Crédit Mobilier*.

Daily newspapers may have carried the news, but few publishers had the resources to fund major investigative reporting activities and to carry the long stories that would result. Magazines were the perfect vehicle for the new form of reporting that became known as “muckracking” (see Fitzpatrick 1994). The same technological innovations that altered the newspaper industry revolutionized magazines, cheapened their production, and led to the mass circulation of the political magazines such as *McClure’s Magazine*, *Harper’s Weekly*, and *The Nation*.

The Press and Anti-Corruption Forces: Our Agenda

We have established that vast changes in the technology of papermaking, printing, and reporting in the nineteenth century gave rise to mass circulation and to the increasing fraction of presses that were deemed “independent.” The central business of newspapers was still “reporting the news,” but it increasingly included “making the news.” The questions we would like to address concern the role of growing intra-city (and intra-regional) competition in newspapers, including the development of the independent press, in the rooting out of corruption. Which newspapers broke the stories? Which did the investigative reporting? What was the role of the independents and what was the role of competition among the aligned presses?

We have used newspaper and magazine indexes that exist in easily searchable form to understand the periods when corruption and fraud were major issues. We offer a few examples of our findings to date, speculate on their meaning, and give further ideas that we will pursue.

We have done a full-text search of the New York *Times* from 1851, when the *Times* was established, to 1950 for articles containing the words “corruption,” “fraud,” and “graft” at least once. As a deflator, we have used a similar procedure on the word “political.” (Other deflators we might be able to use are column inches of text and total number of articles.) Several findings

are clear from Figure 1. The peak in articles containing the words “corruption” and “fraud” is around the 1870s. There was much to report regarding corruption and fraud in the 1870s with the many scandals of the Grant administration, including Crédit Mobilier, the 1876 Tilden-Hayes election, and the election frauds of the South after the withdrawal of Union troops. There was also more local news regarding Tammany Hall and Boss Tweed that involved the investigative reporting of *Times* journalists. The 1870s were clearly a colorful decade marked by corruption and scandal.

There are also various peaks and troughs in almost every decade, such as the spike in 1924 caused by the Teapot Dome scandal. But despite some volatility in the use of words related to “corruption,” a downward trend from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century is apparent.

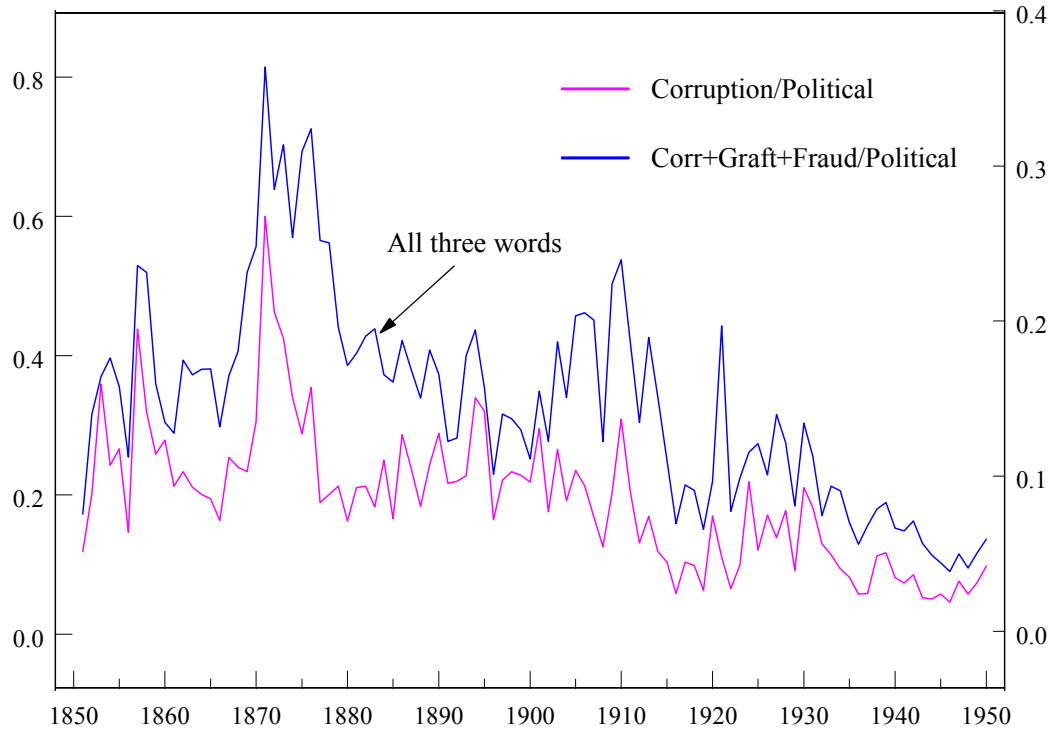
We have also done a similar search on *Harper’s Weekly* from 1857 to 1912, given in Figure 2. Interestingly, the data from a full-text search of *Harper’s* also shows a global peak in the 1870s in articles containing words related to corruption. The fact that the global peaks in the *Times* and *Harper’s* are the same might not be too surprising since the scandals of the Grant administration were widely reported. In addition, the well-known cartoonist Thomas Nast, who was employed by *Harper’s*, used his creativity with the pen to smite the great Tweed just as the *Times* reporters did in their own way. But some of the other peaks are different. *Harper’s* has a smaller peak in the 1890s, whereas the *Times* has none.

The longer time trends in *Harper’s* are not yet clear since our series ends in 1912 (we are currently working to extend it using another search engine). If we truncate our New York *Times* series in 1912 it, too, would not give much appearance of a long run decrease.

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Future work includes getting more searchable indexes for newspapers and better understanding the content including which newspapers were “making the news” rather than just reporting it. One possibility is to use the searchable indexes that are easily accessible, such as that for the *Times*, and trace the origins of the stories reported. Another is to use other indexes that are in printed form hidden in archives and libraries around the country. We are just beginning this project and are eager for your advice and suggestions.

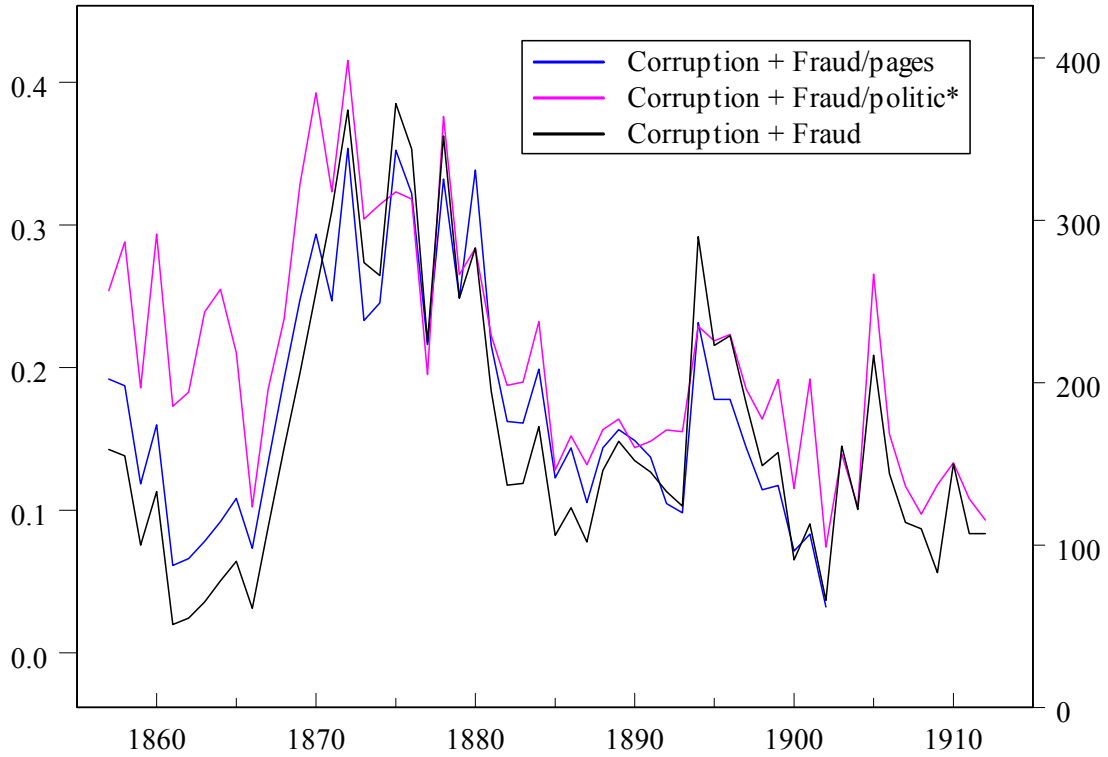
Figure 1
Articles in the New York *Times* Using Words Related to Corruption: 1851 to 1950



Source: New York *Times*, Pro-Quest full-text search engine.

Notes: The full text of all articles in each year was electronically searched for the use of the words “corruption,” “fraud,” and “graft.” The denominator is the number of articles that used the word “political” in each of the years. The left axis is for (Corruption + Fraud + Graft)/Political; the right axis is for (Corruption/Political).

Figure 2
 Articles in *Harper's* Using Words Related to Corruption: 1857 to 1912



Source: *HarpWeek*, electronic edition, full-text search engine of *Harper's Weekly*, 1857-1912.

Notes: The full text of all articles in each year was electronically searched for the use of the words “corrupt*” and “fraud*” (inclusion of “*” allows searches on any suffix to the word given). The denominator is the number of articles that used the word “politic*” in each of the years or the number of pages in *Harper's Weekly*. The left axis is for (Corrupt* + Fraud*)/Politic* and (Corrupt* + Fraud*)/(number of pages); the right axis is for (Corrupt* + Fraud*).

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