The American newspaper business is in trouble today. Many indicators point to the industry's poor financial health. According to a recent study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, advertising revenues are decreasing, circulation figures are dwindling, and corporate earnings are down, even after heavy budget cuts. A 2007 study by the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University found that fewer than one in ten Americans between the ages of twelve and seventeen were regular newspaper readers and that a full half of all Americans aged twelve to thirty "rarely if ever read a newspaper," leading the researchers to conclude that "young Americans are estranged from the daily newspaper." Many industry observers are deeply concerned about these developments and see little hope of these patterns reversing, especially in the face of increasing competition from the Internet. The New York Times media columnist David Carr, for example, argues that the "industry may not be touching bottom any time soon," as the trends of "readers and advertisers fleeing to the Web" continue.

A "War to the Death"

Though the situation is dire, this is not the first time that the American newspaper business has faced challenges from new kinds of electronic media. As early as 1930, journalist F. Parker Stockbridge observed that there has not been a gathering of newspaper men anywhere in which somebody has not called upon the assemblage to declare war on broadcasting. Here is a new medium of news publishing and of advertising. Worse, it is growing while the newspapers are slipping. On the face of it, here are all the elements of a war to the death. Let's look behind the face of the obvious facts and see what's really happening.

Stockbridge's statements are interesting for two reasons. First, by "broadcasting" he meant radio, and it is important to recognize that, almost twenty years before the development of commercial television in the 1940s and a full half-century before the rise of cable news in the 1980s, broadcasting threatened to transform and perhaps even eradicate the newspaper business. Second, Stockbridge hinted at the presence of developments "behind the face of the obvious facts," and went on to discuss how many newspapers had responded to the emergence of broadcasting not with declarations of war but instead by becoming broadcasters themselves. Stockbridge identified a "decided movement in the direction of the ultimate control of radio broadcasting by the newspapers of the United States." He arrived at that assessment after considering how strongly newspapers had influenced radio broadcasting during its first decade in the 1920s.

For many Americans, listening to the radio was an activity often done while reading a newspaper. In this case, the woman on the couch is reading Father Coughlin's newspaper, Social Justice. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

A History of Synergy

Contemporary industry observers use the term "synergy" to describe the ways that corporations use multiple media such as newspapers, web sites, television, and feature films to sell content and advertising. Yet this practice has been a significant part of the media business back to the earliest days of broadcasting. Since the 1920s, many newspaper corporations have met the challenges presented by new media, like radio, by actively making use of those media as part of strategies to expand the channels through which they sell news and information. The business history of twentieth-century American media, in other words, might well be understood as the story of newspaper editors and owners and their responses to new competition.

Newspapers on the Air

Radio broadcasting by newspapers began in August 1920 when the Detroit News-owned station WWJ went on the air. Many prominent urban papers soon followed and began establishing their own radio stations. These publications included the Kansas City Star, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and Atlanta Journal. Starting in the mid-1920s, newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst sought to obtain a radio station in every city where he owned a newspaper. Smaller papers like Indiana's South Bend Tribune started stations, as did the Rochester (New York) Times-Union one of the newspapers owned by future media mogul Frank E. Gannett. In many cases, a newspaper's radio
Radio broadcasting by newspapers reshaped not only local airwaves, but also local skylines, as publishers like the Chicago Daily News built radio towers atop buildings. (Courtesy of Chicago History Museum, DN-0078564)

broadcasting rapidly evolved from an experimental venture conducted with makeshift equipment in a corner of the building into a significant part of its business.

Through radio, a newspaper owner such as Gannett quickly found a way to promote his firm as a modern, forward-looking corporation with a presence in multiple media. A common and successful strategy that many publishers developed to link their broadcasting and newspapers was to obtain call letters reflecting their corporate parent. Radio station WTMJ sported initials standing for its owner, The Milwaukee Journal. The Chicago Tribune, which had long been billing itself as the “World’s Greatest Newspaper,” carried this slogan into radio when it successfully secured the call letters WGN from the Department of Commerce (4).

Pioneer Programming

Newspaper corporations like the Tribune Company innovated not only in this use of multimedia brand promotion, they were also instrumental in creating the sounds of early radio. Just as pioneer Internet sites in the 1990s had to develop online content to attract visitors, radio broadcasters in the 1920s had to create audio content that would attract a listening audience. The Detroit News, for example, claimed to have established the “first radio orchestra ever organized” in 1921. The Chicago Tribune invested heavily in the programming that it aired on WGN. In 1924, the station began broadcasting the games of both the Chicago Cubs and White Sox. The following year the station expanded its coverage of live events to include the Rose Bowl, the Kentucky Derby, and the Indianapolis 500. The Tribune and other papers later added church services, lectures, and live political speeches. After listeners heard broadcasts of these events, announcers reminded them to read more about the events in the next morning’s newspaper. The operators of the Buffalo Evening News used this strategy successfully to link the paper with its radio station, WBEN. As managing editor Alfred Kirchhofer noted, “radio gives the first dramatic picture” of an event, which the printed page later made a “finished product...telling the detailed story of human achievement or human suffering that every newspaper reader wants to learn” (5).

In addition to broadcasting music and covering significant live events, radio stations owned by newspapers also began developing serial programming to attract regular listenership. One of the most popular of these serials was Amos ‘n’ Andy. The program featured white actors playing African American characters and began as Sam ‘n’ Henry in 1926 on the Chicago Tribune’s WGN. The show quickly became a hit, as well as a way for the Tribune to publicize its connection with the radio station. The newspaper gave regular coverage to the program and also ran advertisements (many of which featured patently offensive cartoon images of the title characters) touting itself as its producer (6). In 1927, the Tribune began running a companion comic strip to the broadcast. One advertisement claimed that Sam and Henry were the “favorite sons of radio,” and encouraged fans of the show to read about the pair’s “trials” as a printed comic, which it assured readers would provide “howls of mirth.” In 1928, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, the show’s creators, took the program to WMAQ, the station owned by the rival newspaper Chicago Daily News, changed the name to Amos ‘n’ Andy, and continued to develop the kind of multimedia promotion that the Tribune had provided. Although the Tribune lost Amos ‘n’ Andy, it continued to use its radio station and printed pages to supplement each other by creating serial content circulating in both media. In 1930, for example, WGN began airing a radio version of Little Orphan Annie, a program based on a popular comic strip that the paper had run since 1924 (7).

Throughout the early days of radio broadcasting, Tribune publisher Robert R. McCormick believed strongly that ownership of WGN helped to promote his newspaper. He liked ownership of WGN because it allowed him to “sit in the game” and keep “our business... out in front in a medium which has such a close relationship to the newspaper.” McCormick also needed WGN for competitive reasons. Other newspapers in Chicago like the Daily News owned radio stations, and he feared falling behind. By the end of the 1920s, successful newspaper-radio partnerships like those in Chicago had begun transforming local media markets. Radio injected a new form of competition into commercial rivalries formerly based around the circulation of the printed page (8).

Newspaper-broadcasters like the Tribune in the 1920s not only developed a new business model for a multimedia corporation, but were well positioned to give the new technology of radio the legitimacy it needed. Early radio station owners, after all, were an eclectic group. They included equipment manufacturers, department stores, fraternal organizations, and even some fringe religious groups (9). While all broadcasters were struggling to develop viable business models, newspaper owners brought to radio an established record as successful commercial businesses built squarely upon making information a commodity. Although we take commercials for granted today, it is important to remember that the idea of selling airtime to advertisers had to be developed from scratch in the 1920s. Having clear strategies to sell space on the printed page for advertising, newspaper operators quickly made the transition into selling time on the radio to advertisers, all the while touting the ethics and professionalism that they were bringing to radio and attesting to their high standards for accepting commercials.

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Controversy over Commercialism

Radio, like television after it, was widely criticized for putting commercialism ahead of good programming and public service. In March 1925, for example, Lee De Forest, a pioneer of early radio technology, remarked that radio advertising was "nauseating and vulgar," and he encouraged public opposition to it. This sort of hostility to radio advertising came from many quarters throughout the years of radio's early growth. One ordinary American, Dorothy Rowell, a self-described "elderly maiden lady," wrote to the federal government in 1941 to complain that radio advertising "destroys mental continuity." Unlike a newspaper, Rowell claimed, where a person "may choose what he reads" and even avoid advertising altogether, radio demanded that listeners hear a "totally irrelevant advertisement every two minutes." This, Rowell stated, created a listening experience that was "nerve-wracking" and "exhausting."(10)

In response to these widespread criticisms, newspaper owners of radio stations claimed they were best suited to be broadcasters because they upheld standards of respectability on the air. As W. E. Macfarlane, an executive at the Chicago Tribune and WGN, asserted in 1930, "no industry [was] better qualified to operate a successful broadcasting station than the press." Who else, Macfarlane asked, had a "better understanding of the needs and the desires of a listening public"? Were it up to him to decide who should control American broadcasting, Macfarlane had "no hesitation in saying that newspaper publishers should be preferred." In 1935, Guy Hamilton, the vice president and general manager of McClatchy Newspapers, a California chain that owned several newspapers and radio stations, echoed this rhetoric attesting to newspapers' benevolent commercialism and unique qualifications for broadcasting. Newspapers, Hamilton claimed, were "best fitted to give" good public service over the radio, and he stated that this example of synergy also contained commercial benefits. "The simple fact of ownership of a radio station by a newspaper," Hamilton declared, "promotes circulation, good will and prestige for that newspaper."(11) This sort of industry rhetoric certainly never ended the criticism of commercial broadcasting. Many Americans remained dissatisfied with broadcast advertising long after the 1930s. The self-congratulatory language employed by Hamilton and others, however, did stimulate a public debate about which sorts of corporations were ideal owners of radio stations.

As Hamilton's admission of increased circulation indicated, industry promotional campaigns also earned these newspaper corporations handsome profits. Newspapers continued with their incursions into new media in the coming decades as they expanded their broadcast holdings in FM and television (12). In 1950, a Newsweek writer remarked that the "newspaper business, for all its reputation, isn't so stodgy as you may think." Noting that, when the "menace of radio" appeared in the 1920s, many publishers "decided that if they couldn't lick 'em, at least they could join 'em. And they did—by buying or founding station after station. They did the same thing when FM came along. Now they're doing it for the third time with television." In the formative era of American broadcasting in the 1920s, newspaper corporations used radio as a way to expand the scope of their businesses, in the process transforming themselves and the business of the media more generally. This process created corporations that came to hold an extraordinary influence over Americans' politics, society, and daily understandings of the world in which they lived (13).

Corporations in all industries, including automakers such as General Motors and coffee shops such as Starbucks, face threats from new competition and choices about adopting new technologies; the newspaper business is not unique in this regard. As journalist Ben Bagdikian pointed out in 2004, though, the corporations in the business of media are "unique in one vital respect. They do not manufacture nuts and bolts: they manufacture a social and political world." As such, understanding the business of these media corporations is important for Americans not only as consumers, but also as citizens. To understand the business of the American media is at bottom to understand the corporations and institutions undergirding our society and politics (14).

Conclusion

In many ways, owners of newspapers in the 1920s and 1930s faced the same challenges that contemporary newspaper publishers have been facing as they approach the competition posed by the Internet for advertising revenue and public influence. Just as contemporary publishers confront the Internet and a declining youth market for newspa-
pers, publishers in the past were especially concerned about the need to attract and retain younger readers who were fascinated by radio. What many newspapers did was to use radio—the “new media” of the day—to supplement and sustain the business of selling the printed newspaper. As Walter Damm, the promotion manager of the Milwaukee Journal (owner of WTMJ) noted in 1935, the paper’s “executives have always felt that the child of today is the subscriber of tomorrow,” and they developed a variety of strategies in the 1920s and 1930s to use both forms of media to cultivate a young audience and ensure the paper’s continued success. Whether these examples from the past will prove useful for the challenges facing the twenty-first-century newspaper business remains to be seen. It is quite possible that they will not. But as newspapers struggle to remain socially relevant and commercially viable in the face of competition from the Internet, they are not wanting for examples of how the industry addressed such competition in the past (13).

Endnotes


3. A prominent current example is the News Corporation, whose corporate holdings include the Fox Broadcasting Company, over thirty television stations, the Wall Street Journal, TV Guide, and the film studio 20th Century Fox. The Free Press maintains an excellent resource on contemporary media ownership at <http://www.freepress.net/ownership>.

4. The call letters for most broadcast stations in the United States begin with the letter “W” if they are east of the Mississippi River, or “K” if they are west of it. Most, but not all, of the exceptions to this rule are in states along the river.


6. See for example, Advertisement, Chicago Tribune, January 10, 1926: E2; Advertisement, Chicago Tribune, April 22, 1926: 14.


12. The number of AM stations owned by newspapers reached almost 33 percent by 1940 and the number of FM stations 35 percent by 1950. Newspapers also owned 45 percent of American television stations in 1952 and 63 percent in 1953. Figures taken from calculations by the author from Broadcasting Yearbook, various years.


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