

The invention of news – how the world came to know about itself (book review)

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If you've been on this planet recently and have access to electricity, you are probably familiar with the assertion that 'the Internet is the most important invention since Printing'.

Indeed, for journalism scholars, looking back to Gutenberg can be a useful way to look forward beyond Berners-Lee, Zuckerberg and Jobs. But what about all the stuff in-between? How did we get from block printing presses to the modern idea of journalism and news? This fascinating book tells us.

The Invention of News is by a Reformation historian not a hack and so does not suffer from the media centric fallacy of assuming that journalism is the end-point of human development rather than a by-product. Andrew Pettegree writes with great clarity and an almost perfect balance between telling detail, engrossing anecdote or case study, and a broader, confident sense of what changes and why it matters. I think he secretly quite likes hacks but he does not over-estimate their idealism or importance.

There are already [classic histories of the invention of printing](#) and [George Brock's recent book on newspapers](#) has an excellent section on the history of the modern press. But this book fills in the gap between manuscripts and mass media. In fact it starts a lot earlier and takes us from the Romans and the wax tablets found near Hadrian's Wall right up to the revolutions in France and America. The best sections are from the 16th to 18th centuries when we move from pamphlets to papers.

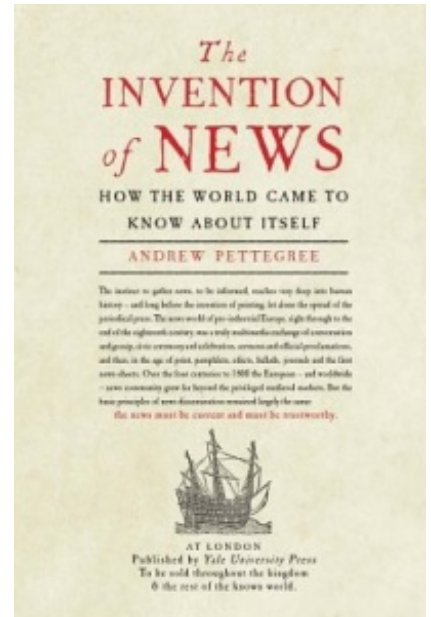
This is a thorough narrative history but what makes it essential reading for anyone interested in the future of news are the lessons it teaches about the nature of journalism and media change:

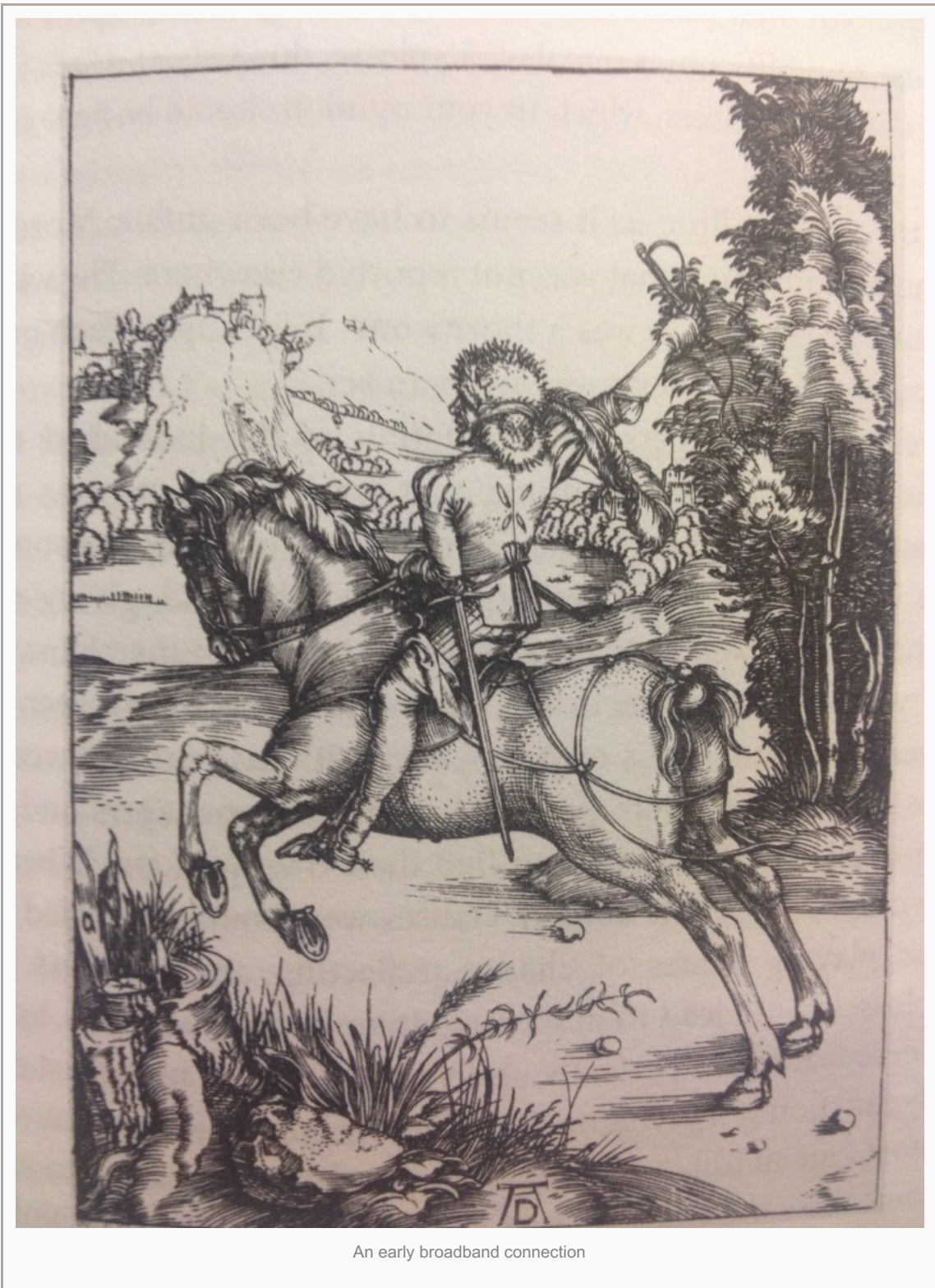
The arrival of print in the mid-fifteenth century offered many new opportunities; but it had to make its way in a world where networks for the distribution of news had already been developed: networks with standards, conventions and social freights with which those in circles of power were fully conversant. In the centuries that followed print disrupted and then reshaped this infrastructure, bringing new customers into the circle of news but without fully superseding the established norms. The news media of this era presented every bit as much a multi-media phenomenon as our own. It is that which gives this period its particular fascination.

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There are many good things in this book that I could list. But sticking to the idea of media change alone it gives great insight and helps resist the myth that digital media is somehow uniquely transformative.

Pettegree shows very clearly how older forms of communication such as speech, letters and manuscript are often accentuated rather than diminished by the new printed media. Even walking. Pettegree shows how the pilgrimage routes that ran across Europe were the continent's first information 'super highways' carrying data and news aided by the new printed maps.





An early broadband connection

Trade, religion and a prurient interest in gossip, sex and sensation fuel the pamphleteers as 16th century reporting becomes a vital tool in the building of states. News also becomes a weapon in battles between them.

As the Armada head off from Spain to smite England propaganda hurtled around Europe spreading dis-information and seeking to boost allies and frighten Drake's sailors. News of the Spanish triumph was already winging it way to the courts across the continent spread by over-eager hacks going with the latest rumour of the expected victory for Philip II rather than reporting the reality of a massive military upset. Even back then verification was a problem when news was breaking especially in the confusion of conflict.

In the 18th century we get a more familiar story with the emergence of something called journalism from the coffee houses of London and Paris. Advertising starts to support newspapers, although a lot of money is also made from political subsidies (bribes). Very few people, however, seem to make much money, least of all the hacks.

It is at this point that power really seeks to prevent a free press. Even in post-revolutionary America the First Amendment is matched with local restrictions while in London the eventual concession of parliamentary reporting is balanced with tough libel laws. In revolutionary France things started with Enlightened openness but ended with 1/6 of journalists being killed as Robespierre urged punishment for 'treacherous journalists who are the most dangerous enemies of liberty'. Snowden and Assange have it easy.

But it is the variety of business model development that I found most intriguing in this book. News never really made much money despite the early emergence of some media moguls such as Charles-Joseph Panckoucke in France who manages to make money in Royal and Revolutionary times by clever political and business deals.

This was a period of start-up culture. Individual innovators tried new formats that often only lasted a few years. There were news sheets, pamphlets, subscriptions, data visualisations (wood-cuts), FAQs, classifieds, 'branded journalism', news aggregators, and even news agencies. And all this, remember, before the mass mechanisation of production and distribution made possible in the 19th century by steam, railways and telegraph.

They found new audiences such as women and the newly-educated bourgeoisie eager for information on stocks, shares, and warfare. Although it is clear that news was consumed as much because it was entertaining and fashionable as it was useful.

These early pioneers faced the same blogger v journalist debates about credibility, objectivity, bias and authority. But their main problem, like now, was survival.

You see the early stages of business journalism (generally very functional – they didn't foresee any crashes either) and campaigning journalism (generally not very effective). But there's also a lot of reporting rubbish such as miracles, freaks, apparitions and satire, although the market before the 19th century is quite elite.

The point is not that news has always been the same. Quite the opposite. Pettegree shows that it was constantly changing and always diverse according to national cultures and social conditions. So Germany with its many dukedoms and principalities has thousands of newspapers while England has a much more concentrated press centred around central London.

This book shows that news has always been part of a wider network of communications. Now we seem to be heading back to something like that period when journalism was a minority within wider media. Instead of dominating the information landscape, journalism has to find novel ways to connect to new sources, channels and platforms. That, if nothing else, has not changed.

