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THE EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

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Jan Hansen, Jochen Hung, Jaroslav Ira, Judit Klement, Sylvain Lesage, Juan Luis Simal and Andrew Tompkins (eds), *The European Experience: A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0323>

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This book is one of the outcomes of the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership “Teaching European History in the 21st Century”, which ran from 2019-2022 and was funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ Key Action 2 (Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices).



The European Commission's support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents, which reflect the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-870-8

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-871-5

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-872-2

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-80064-873-9

ISBN Digital ebook (azw3): 978-1-80064-874-6

ISBN XML: 978-1-80064-875-3

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-876-0

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0323

Cover image: Wilhelm Gunkel, *Fly Angel Fly* (2019). Cover design by Katy Saunders

7.2.2 Mass Media and Popular Culture in Modern History (ca. 1800–1900)

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Introduction

At the outset of the nineteenth century, Europe was a continent in motion. The Atlantic Revolutions, most prominently in the United States (1765–1783) and France (1789–1799), had created new political energies, had spread powerful new ideas about democracy and individual freedom, and had generated social changes within European societies. These energies were mirrored by technological innovations which transformed Europeans' relationship to information. The combination of new societal energies with the new information technologies that became available spawned the emergence of mass media and shaped the popular culture of the nineteenth century and beyond.

This was a very uneven process, impacting European societies to significantly varying degrees both within states and across the continent. Mainly in urban areas and industrialising regions, but in some agricultural regions as well, this process impacted the way in which exchanges of information took place. Furthermore, it brought about a change in the accessibility of information to different segments of the population, and transformed the information that could be produced and disseminated.

Some of these transformative mass-media technologies were already established at the start of the century: newspapers and publishing, for example, were already widespread, but still saw their audiences grow exponentially over the course of the century, and their role in society was transformed. Other forms of technology were new—such as photography (which was presented to the public in 1839), or sound recording (which was made possible by the development of the phonograph in the 1870s).

Some of these new technologies, like photography, became mass media virtually overnight. Others spread more slowly: the radio, for example, took decades to develop into a mass medium after its invention in the late-nineteenth century. The fact that certain technologies did not rapidly acquire a mass public did not make them irrelevant: even if they may have been in limited use, the adoption of the telegraph in 1830 and the telephone in 1876 fundamentally reshaped perceptions of distance, speed, and communication.

The 'Newspaper Civilisation' of Nineteenth-century Europe

The mass medium which impacted European societies the most—partly because it was already an established form of communication, but more importantly because of its practicality and cost-effectiveness—was the newspaper. Its rapidly expanding readership, which grew over time across the continent to an audience of millions, comprehensively shaped the development of public debates and national identities. This impact was so profound that, according to some observers, the widening distribution and significance of newspapers gave rise to a new 'cultural regime'.

Symbolised by the newspaper, and in particular the daily newspaper, the new urban environment in many European cities has been described as the "newspaper civilisation" (Kalifa, 2011). In the nineteenth century, words printed on paper flooded into European homes: small and cheap editions of books, posters, flyers, magazines, and newspapers. Before the nineteenth century, reading had primarily been an activity for the elite, geared towards religion or the acquisition of knowledge. But in the nineteenth century, reading became a popular activity, increasingly oriented towards pleasure, news, and opinion. Newspapers became the matrix of minds, and the main shaper of opinions. As the German philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) wrote: "Reading newspapers is the morning prayer of the modern citizen".

The costs of paper, printing, and the distribution of printed material all significantly decreased in the nineteenth century, in part because of increasing economies of scale. At the British newspaper *The Times of London*, for example, the introduction of the Koenig steam press in 1815 accelerated its production to 1,000 sheets per hour, and the Applegarth printing press, acquired in 1827, increased it to 4,000 per hour. This allowed *The Times* to be printed later in the day, and therefore to offer readers more up-to-date news than the competition. At the same time, print runs increased significantly: the circulation of *The Times* went from 5,000 copies in 1815 to 40,000 in 1851.

All facets of newspaper production were similarly impacted by modernisation, from paper (the introduction of cellulose in 1938) to printing

methods (most importantly the rotary press, introduced in the 1840s) and typography. A decisive step in this last facet of newspaper production was the introduction of the so-called hot metal typesetting, used in linotype machines. Until then, the preparation of a text for printing did not differ fundamentally from the methods used in Gutenberg's time: each typeface had to be selected, aligned and justified, all by hand; after use, the typefaces were removed for reuse. With the Linotype, introduced in the 1880s, the process was automated, making typesetting six times faster.

The increased newspaper production was matched by a similar growth in demand for news. Over the course of the century, increased access to education (often public education, offered by the state) led to mass literacy in the industrialising countries of the continent. At the same time, political censorship eased in many countries. These developments allowed newspapers to take a central place in the European cultural landscape over the course of the nineteenth century. Cheaply produced and cheaply sold—for half a penny in England and five centimes in France—popular newspapers fitted neatly with an economic model based on growing popular consumption and advertising. Especially towards the end of the century, newspapers and other periodicals blended a variety of subjects: news items next to women's pages, an airy layout and large headlines, a sports section, economic news, and betting competitions. Circulation figures reflected the cultural position of newspapers. France, for example, was a country of around forty million inhabitants at the start of the twentieth century, and counted four newspapers that exceeded one million copies in 1914.

Visual Culture, Photography and Cinema

Not only text, but also images penetrated the lives of millions of Europeans. Before the nineteenth century, most Europeans came across few images in their daily lives. The pious could see religious paintings in Catholic or Orthodox—but not Protestant—churches. Some countries, most notably the Dutch Republic, had a popular painting culture. But this was the exception: as a rule, paintings were commissioned by the church, the nobility, and economic elites. The cost of image production kept their reach limited. As a result, visual culture was limited to a small segment of society.

This changed in the nineteenth century. Shortly before it began, lithography—a method of printing images that used limestone or metal plates—was invented by the German author Alois Senefelder (1771–1834). In the beginning, lithography was used primarily for printing sheet music and maps, but technological advances spread its use to fine prints and posters.

Print shops that sold these prints and posters sprang up across the continent. The printing press incorporated images as well, often as woodblock print.

In newspapers, these wood engravings were first used for the mastheads, but increasingly served as visual depictions of newsworthy people or events. From the 1840s onward, illustrated newspapers sprang up in countries across the continent. The *Illustrated London News* was the first to reach a mass audience, swiftly followed by other notable titles such as the *Illustrirte Zeitung*, published in Leipzig, and *L'Illustration* of Paris, and later by other illustrated newspapers from Portugal's *A Ilustração* to Russia's *Vsemirnoy Obozreniye*.

These illustrated newspapers did more than simply present news in an attractive way. They expanded and democratised the audience for news, and reshaped the way the public related to events. Where news had always been delivered in oral or printed form, news now also became something visual, changing how audiences across the continent understood the world around them, and increasing the knowledge that broad segments of European populations could engage with or possess.

Visual knowledge was accessible to the illiterate, and could include representation of the wider world: prints and 'views' of monuments and landmarks, such as the pyramids in Egypt, became popular illustrations and increased Europeans' mental reach far beyond their physical travels. And because an international market developed for such prints—illustrated magazines buying each other's engravings, printmakers exporting their wares to print shops abroad—a continental visual culture started to take shape.

The photograph played the main role in this process. The invention of the photographic process led to a craze in the 1840s for the first type of photograph—the so-called daguerreotype, invented by the French painter Louis Daguerre (1787–1851). As early as 1840, one year after the presentation of photography at the French Academy of Sciences, a satirical sketch by the caricaturist Théodore Maurisset (1803–1860) mocked '*la Daguerreotypemanie*' ('Daguerreotype mania'), with throngs of people jostling to see, buy and take photographs (see Figure 1). Photographs in this period were mainly portraits, but were also still lifes, or depicted natural wonders and cityscapes. Other types of photography soon followed the daguerreotype: types that were cheaper and—crucially—could be reproduced endlessly.

The spread of photography not only added a new medium for disseminating information, but also implied a mental revolution: changing people's conception of what was true, real, and verifiable. It also created a demand for family portraits, *cartes de visite*, and stereographs (which could be viewed in 3D), to be sold in print shops. A market emerged for *cartes de visite* of notable people, as well as posters where they were arranged in groups

(such as 'opera singers' or 'kings and queens'), creating the first outlines of a celebrity culture.



Fig. 1: Maurisset, Théodore, *La Daguerreotypomanie* (1840), Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.02343/>.

At the very end of the century, the advent of moving images profoundly shaped the reach and influence of visual culture in Europe. Widely credited as the pioneers of popular cinema, the French photographers Auguste (1862–1954) and Louis (1864–1948) Lumière invented an early motion-picture film mechanism consisting of a movie camera and a film projector. Their first commercial public screening of several short films on 28 December 1895 at the Salon Indien du Grand Café in Paris is commonly seen as the birth of European cinema. The audiences of nineteenth-century Europe, who had already experienced one explosion of visual culture through illustrated newspapers and photography, immediately took to the new medium. While it retained the character of a curiosity or novelty until the first decades of the twentieth century, cinema created completely new media audiences and ways to engage with culture that were not modelled on earlier, mostly bourgeois ways of media consumption, such as contemplative listening or reading. Its visuality, which cut through barriers of language and education, suited a society characterised by migration and illiteracy.

The Transformation of News

Communication increased in volume and accelerated in speed. At the beginning of the century, the rapid transmission of news and messages was achieved by networks of special couriers and carrier pigeons. The speed of transmission exponentially increased with the development of the electric telegraph, in use from 1845 onwards. Whereas the news of the victory of Austerlitz in 1805 had taken ten days to reach Paris, it took no more than two hours for a speech by Napoleon III to be known in Algiers in 1858. From 1851, a cable linked Calais to Dover and by 1866, a cable connected both sides of the Atlantic.

News was relayed by news agencies, the first of which was founded in 1835 in Paris by Charles-Louis Havas. Two employees of his Agence Havas (now Agence France-Presse, AFP) started their own agency: German-born Paul Julius Reuter founded Reuter's, first in Aachen and then relocated to London, while his compatriot Bernard Wolff founded Wolffs Telegraphisches Bureau. In 1865, these three formed a news cartel, somewhat grandiosely called the '*Grande Alliance*', in which they divided up Europe amongst themselves and agreed to share and monopolise news on the continent.

The laying of submarine cables and the invention of text transcribers made the electric telegraph the essential instrument for transmitting news. All major European newspapers were equipped with it, and the telegraph contributed to structuring centres and peripheries within countries. These were linked 'by wire' to the capital. Later, newspapers were among the first to subscribe to the telephone. Using all technological improvements to deliver information before other newspapers became the central aim, making speed a key element in the competition between news media.

The railway allowed reporters to travel faster, and also increased the circulation of newspapers and other journals. This generated new audiences and helped to forge national identities, rooted in nationally-oriented news and collective debate. These national identities sometimes corresponded to state boundaries, while in other cases they did not. In Bohemia for example, which was under Austro-Hungarian control, several daily newspapers were published in Czech in the 1860s: *Čas*, *Národní Listy*, and *Pokrok*. In 1890, there were 418 periodicals available in Bohemia, 253 of which were in Czech, a testament to the relative freedom enjoyed by the various nationalities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In Italy, nationally-oriented newspapers, such as *La Nazione* (founded in Florence, 1855) preceded Italian political unification. More generally, the countries that were unified at an early stage had a press that was more centred on their capitals (Paris, Copenhagen, Madrid), while un-unified countries such as Germany and Italy were distinguished by a more fragmented communication and information structure.

Thus in European countries both national and state audiences emerged; often, but not always, these audiences overlapped. Journalism and media entrepreneurship appeared as professions, and their practitioners often associated with professional bodies. Cultural societies and associations were founded, on a larger scale than the reading rooms of the eighteenth century. Indeed, the emergence of new social classes meant that the audiences of the nineteenth century mass media could be class-based. Especially with mass media focused on the working class, the political dimension of new media content was never far from view. Mass media in the nineteenth century were therefore also bound up with the development of new democratic parties and political audiences.



Fig. 2: Oscar Begas, *Evening reading circle in a Berlin artists' house* (1849), CC BY-NC-SA, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, https://www.europeana.eu/de/item/2064108/Museu_ProvidedCHO_Kupferstichkabinett_Staatliche_Museen_zu_Berlin_DE_MUS_018511_1502506.

Mass Media Communication and New Ways of Experiencing Space and Belonging

The nineteenth century saw a massive reconfiguration in the spatial organisation of societies. This was not only due to the impact of new media and their uses. Mass migration, for example, also played a role in this process. But the new media landscape was a primary cause behind this new conception of space, contributing to the redefinition of the mental maps of people in Europe. New forms of communication, including the mechanised printing press, the

telegraph, and photography, helped to open up new ways of imagining the world, allowing individuals to view their own local experiences in the much broader contexts of national, transnational, or even global belonging. At the same time, the use of individual media created new forms of spatialisation, with people socialising in literary salons, reading the newspaper at home, or communicating with one another via the telegraph.

New information and communication technologies as well as new forms of travel and increased mobility found their way into popular discourse and became topics of some of the best-selling books of the era. For example, in his 1872 novel *Le Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours*—which was rapidly translated into English, German, and other languages—the French author Jules Verne (1828–1905) depicted a British gentleman who made a bet that he would be able to travel the world in eighty days. Starting from his local London gentlemen’s club, the readership of Verne’s novel followed its hero on his journey around the globe.

Fascinated readers were introduced to both modern and ‘exotic’ means of transportation, but also to the newest forms of communication, which often played an important part in the plot. The telegraph featured prominently in the book, creating a sense of connectedness between the British Empire’s centre in London and various other stations around the world. The very fact that the story started in an armchair in a gentlemen’s club in London from where it linked the Mediterranean, the Indian Subcontinent, the ‘Far East’, the United States of America and several other places together, was mirrored in the experience of the novel’s many European (and international) readers while reading the book itself.

The use of media and its capacity to reorganise the experience and meaning of the world had a long past. During the French Revolution, a prominent cultural practice was reading placards and looking at the latest—often satirical—illustrations. In fact, the new symbolic order of the French Republic emerged from the dissemination and reception of a vast number of emblematic publications which combined written information with easily identifiable and formative visual content. The expansion and increasing importance of public communication during the revolution helped to establish a transnational mode of observation that addressed mass audiences in many different countries. This process relied on and developed new or reinvigorated print industry networks and newly established illustrated magazines like *The Illustrated London News*. Photography soon became one of the most important media which established a new mode not only of ‘knowing’ the world but also which inspired feelings of solidarity or hostility toward people across the globe.

At the same time, the reorganisation of the perception of the world did not mean that the nineteenth century only witnessed an ever-growing expansion

of the arena of national or transnational communication. A combination of different developments in fact altered the spatial organisation of society. The practice of reading, for example, changed drastically during the nineteenth century. While literacy had risen to new heights over the course of the century, thanks in part to the introduction of new school systems, these new reading audiences no longer met in public libraries or clubs to exercise reading as a social practice in public venues. On the contrary, at the end of the century the vast number of newspapers and books that had become available at least to an urban population was mostly read in private. The reorganisation of space created by new media during the nineteenth century therefore had an ambiguous character. It started to link people together, establishing new realms of belonging (not least the nation, as an 'imagined community'), while at the same time laying the groundwork for more private and individual practices of media use and reception which—to an observer in the twenty-first century—would appear more recognisable. New media also created new divisions, for example between a media avant-garde in major cities—people who had access to the newest media trends and incorporated them quickly into their lives—and less well-connected people in Europe's peripheral regions.

Conclusion

Europe in the nineteenth century was as diverse as at any point in its history, and new developments influenced its various regions in different ways. Nonetheless, new technologies for mass communication affected all European countries, and profoundly impacted and shaped popular culture in its cities and more connected regions: spreading new ideas, creating new audiences, accelerating the rise of new political parties and classes, and changing people's outlooks on the world. The new media of the time—such as illustrated newspapers, photography, or the electric telegraph—created new mass audiences that extended far beyond the elite circles of earlier media consumption. At the same time, they created new divisions between mainly urban audiences with easy access to media content and rural or peripheral audiences that were often excluded from this new media landscape.

The popular culture of the nineteenth century was thoroughly shaped by these new media technologies, becoming more visual, more easily accessible and available, more political, and more urban. The novels, newspapers, and images of the period often reflected the transnational nature of this new popular culture, in both their content and form—as was the case with photography and cinema, which transcended barriers of language. At the same time, the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century was closely linked to the development of new media technologies.

Discussion questions

1. In which ways did the new media of the nineteenth century contribute to a politicisation of culture?
2. Why was the new visibility of nineteenth-century popular culture so important?
3. What is the role of the mass media today? Do they contribute to a sense of national belonging? Or do they create a sense of Europeanness?

Suggested reading

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