



From *Folletos* to “Fake News”: The Origins of the Political Fragmentation of Media

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In 2016, many high-profile elections were influenced not only by a rigid division of the electorate, but also by notable differences in the voters’ sources of news and information. After the United States presidential election, numerous post-mortem think-pieces blamed “social media bubbles” and “echo chambers” as a central threat to democracy.¹ The social circles that people tend to inhabit, due to political, generational, and socio-economic divides, are reflected in their social media networks. Over time, these networks become echo chambers in which users select which sites provide their reading material and “hide” the friends and acquaintances who disagree with them, and therefore only see shared content that confirms their existing biases and ideas. These shared articles come from sources that tend to fall on a spectrum of ideological orientation as well as journalistic rigor and complexity. Charts published on sites like Reddit and Twitter attempted to identify the quality and political orientation of dozens of news sources, ranging from complex journalism that sometimes skews partisan (*The New York Times* on the left, *The Wall Street Journal* on the right) to hyper-partisan sensationalist clickbait (*Occupy Democrats* on the left, *InfoWars* on the right).² People who fall on one side of the political spectrum or the other tend to get their information from sources that confirm their points of view without challenging their beliefs.

A similar phenomenon occurred in Great Britain. The 2016 campaign to leave the European Union had significant support on social media, and according to a YouGov poll, voters who supported remaining in the EU “overwhelmingly believe the Brexit campaign would have failed had the poll taken place before the existence of Facebook and Twitter” (Singh). Voters were concerned about extremist viewpoints, alienation, and misleading news stories; more than two-thirds of Britons thought that sites like Facebook should do more to filter out fake news from users’ newsfeeds (Singh).

In Spain, the 2016 general election demonstrated a phenomenon that Lucía Méndez terms “la burbuja político-mediática.” “Digital” Spain was constantly inundated with political articles, debates, and interviews, which did not correspond with the real, “analog” Spain in which citizens are not terribly politicized and don’t tend to talk about politics with their friends and family. Méndez cites sociologist Óscar López to explain that social

networks are “espacios endogámicos” in which each party just talks to itself. She also refers to sociologist Narciso Michavila, who notes that “las redes sociales—paradójicamente—han devuelto la política al siglo XIX, cuando los ciudadanos escribían cartas a los políticos para hablarles de cosas concretas. Ahora les envían *tuits* con sus quejas.”

This comparison between modern social media and 19th-century political discourse is precisely what I would like to explore. There is a great deal of focus on how modern political engagement is unique, and certainly, many aspects of 21st-century politics are unprecedented. There are hundreds of news sources on multiple platforms, giving the reader a sense of information overload and making it difficult to form a well-rounded opinion. However, this notion that media sources are specialized to the political leanings of their readers is centuries old. As a case study, I am focusing on Spanish periodicals during the early-to-mid-19th century, a time of significant political upheaval and frequent turnover of power.³ Political newspapers were extremely popular, each one tailored to a specific ideology during a period when there were multiple political parties, and readers could seek out publications that confirmed and strengthened their pre-existing ideas. Through reading discussion groups (known as *tertulias*) and letters to the editor, readers developed communities around their chosen publications, whose editors sought to maintain those communities with relevant and often entertaining content.

The editors did not necessarily intend to create division among their readers, but they effectively did so by presenting them with varying worldviews and conflicting versions of Spanish national identity. That is to say, two people who read newspapers that were affiliated with different political parties likely had dissimilar and even opposing understandings of what their country stood for, who should lead it, and what its goals for the future should have been. While this does not mirror all of the idiosyncrasies of 21st-century media dissemination, I believe that these 19th-century publications demonstrate the origins of these problematic news bubbles.

The Century of the Newspaper

Newspapers were present in Europe and the United States during the 17th-century, but they were handcrafted and had limited distribution. There was a dispersed reading public for news journals, and the transmission was often person-to-person. In the 18th century, these publications began to grow in terms of distribution and influence. Newspapers were often supported and published by political parties, such as the Tories and Whigs in England, or the Federalists and Democratic-Republicans in the United States (Kovarik). They were considered an important tool of intellectual enlightenment as well as political power; Edmund Burke coined the term “Fourth Estate” to illustrate the power of the press in a speech to Parliament in 1787 (Kovarik).

The 19th century, however, was truly the century of the newspaper. There were many factors that led to increased publication and production, including relaxed stamp laws, steam-powered printing technology, the telegraph (as a way to spread information) and the railroad (as a method of shipping). Newspapers were booming, with many major

cities boasting hundreds of independent publications. For the first time, notes Standage, the newspaper “was truly a mass medium: mass produced for a mass audience” (175). It was a cultural juggernaut; many of the most popular novels of the 19th century—including *Les Misérables*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Three Musketeers*, *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, and the *Sherlock Holmes* novels—were serially published in newspapers. Many famous phrases originated in newspapers (Kovarik), such as “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?” (*Daily Telegraph*, 1869) and “Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus” (*New York Sun*, 1897) and “J’accuse!” (*L’aurore*, 1898).

For those who had the ability to read in the 19th century, newspapers were the principal source of information, and there was significant competition among newspapers to make their stories appealing and grab the readers’ attention. Content was shortened or simplified and often included images or cartoons, as we see with 21st-century memes or tweets. In his work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas describes the illustrated newspapers that were starting to appear in the 19th century as a simpler, easier way of reading the news:

Nonverbal communications [...] replaced to a greater or lesser extent the classical forms of literary production. These trends can also be observed in the daily press which is still closest to them. By means of variegated type and layout and ample illustration reading is made easy at the same time that its field of spontaneity in general is restricted by serving up the material as a ready-made convenience, patterned and predigested. Editorial opinions recede behind information from press agencies and reports from correspondents; critical debate disappears behind the veil of internal decisions concerning the selection and presentation of the material. (169)

Here, we see evidence that readers not only select their reading material, but that it is selected, curated, and analyzed for them in a way that editorializes content rather than simply presenting it.

Several other concepts that we associate with modern-day media production evolved in the 19th century, such as reporters and advertisers. With the increased readership, advertisers reached more customers, printing costs came down, and politics became more democratized as publications were freed from dependence on political parties (Kovarik 48). The political power of these publications was undeniable; the press was “setting agendas, forging political identities and commenting on everyday political issues” (Barker and Burrows 17) and, in doing so, played pivotal roles in revolutions, uprisings, elections, and political union and fracturing. Marcelino Tobajas describes the transition from the 18th century to the 19th century as a movement away from the encyclopedic press of the Enlightenment and towards political engagement and revolution (116).

Politics became the focus of the 19th century press, which operated with the goal of motivating “collective units,” or groups of advocates for certain causes who were dispersed throughout a region or country (Eisenstein 83-4). In order to form a group

identity, creators of print media had to select the news that would appeal to members of that group, and distill it into a format that would inform their readers' worldview on a weekly or daily basis.

The Spanish Press

Many written histories of modern print culture in the West, such as those compiled by Bernstein, Kovarik, and Standage, ignore Spain, except for brief mentions of Hearst and Pulitzer's yellow journalism and its relationship with the Spanish-American War.⁴ However, the history of the 19th century in Spain is intrinsically linked to the history of print media. Gisèle Cazottes and Enrique Rubio Cremades refer to the 19th century as "el siglo de la prensa" (48) and explain how, in less than a century, Spain came to have over 1,300 newspapers. They also establish the political strength and function of these publications: "La prensa surge primero para servir los intereses de los partidos políticos, con una profusión de periódicos liberales y serviles, muchos de vida muy efímera" (48). The newspapers functioned as a sort of communal dialogue, presenting and shaping the public opinion during a chaotic period in Spain's political history. The editors and writers of political newspapers became local celebrities (Tobajas 290), with catchy pseudonyms such as *Fíguro* (Mariano José de Larra), *El Estudiante* (Antonio María Segovia), *César Romano* (Ramón de Castañeira) and *Valdés el de los Gatos* (Manuel Valdés Alger). There were even clandestine publications such as *El Murciélagu*, a paper that reproached abuses of the government, but was published anonymously to avoid repercussions.⁵

One of the main goals of the Spanish press during the 19th century was to subvert political restriction and censorship. There were cycles of growth and decline of papers due to various royal decrees and laws that limited the power of the press by restricting publication of content deemed harmful or dangerous to the government, or the monarchy. When those restrictions were lifted, publication exploded, including 323 papers between 1808-1814 and the appearance and demise of almost 700 papers from 1820-1823 (Tobajas 169, 199). After the Revolution of 1868, there was a period of relative press freedom, guaranteed by the Constitutions of 1869 and 1875 (Botrel 283, García Barrón 79). However, as the press continued to grow and diversify, political fragmentation intensified; the government continued suspending certain unfavorable publications and kept others afloat due to a secret slush fund called a "fondo de reptiles" that was used to financially support publications which displayed a favorable opinion towards their policies (Gil).

For the purposes of this study, I am examining publications from the time period of Isabel II's reign, due to the near-constant fluctuations in the symbiotic worlds of politics and the press.⁶ According to María José Ruiz Acosta, the inexistence of political parties complicated the situation further by provoking the 19th-century press to act as the representative of the political public and serve as the base around which parties and groups organized themselves (428). The political situation in Spain in the first half of the 19th century involved a perpetual cycle of parties fragmenting, uniting, rising to power, and losing power within a few years. We can identify many distinct political parties during this time, including progressives, moderates, absolutists, republicans, democrats,

and, later in the century, socialists and anarchists. Therefore, the political press at the time acquired “una intensidad y pluralidad únicas en la historia moderna y contemporánea españolas” (429).⁷

Numerous scholars have defined certain decades of the 19th century by speaking simultaneously of Spaniards’ experienced reality and how that reality was reflected in the press. Pedro Gómez Aparicio describes a new national spirit around the year 1813, brought about by the fragmentation of a previously unanimous national opinion, exacerbated by a precipitous growth of antagonistic, polemical newspapers (109). With that fragmentation, we see a split in how national identity is presented, often corresponding with the political party whose ideas were predominant in certain publications. In the first few decades of the century, the press was largely moderate (Seoane y Saíz 80, Tobajas 300), but when speaking of the political chaos that followed the Revolution of 1854, Gómez Aparicio states that it was faithfully reflected in the chaotic press of the time (403). Over the course of decades, newspapers changed to reflect the political situation, but those in the position to publish also had a great deal of power to provoke political change themselves. I will now examine several political publications from Isabel II’s reign in terms of their content, goals, and political orientation. All of the newspapers I will be discussing in this section are products of a Madrid-based press, which represented 90% of the papers that circulated by mail (Seoane y Saíz 104), although both Cádiz and Barcelona also had a significant number of local papers.

Political Publications

La Revista Española (1832-1836) started out as a literary paper with issues appearing twice a week and evolved into a daily political paper with a goal of informing its audience.⁸ This change is especially notable because publications that dealt with issues of politics and religion experienced more censorship and licensing restrictions than literary or scientific publications. However, the political issues were important enough to bring about a change in focus. In 1834, the paper changed leadership from the playwright José María Carnerero to the politician Antonio Alcalá Galiano, thus moving from adulation of the monarchy to a more critical, satirical tone.

El Eco del Comercio (1834-1849, ed. don Fermín Caballero) was an important voice in opposition to the moderate government; they were the *de facto* opponent of both “los ministerios de Martínez de la Rosa y del conde de Toreno” (Tobajas 281) and of the government propositions with respect to the press (360). The editors’ progressive ideals led them to inform their readers of provincial, national, and international news, but also to speak out in favor of the liberal bourgeois revolution, supporting ideas such as the *desamortización* of Church property and the freedom of the press.

El Clamor Público (1844-1864, ed. Gabriel Gil), was founded when Fernando Corradi left *El Eco del Comercio* in an effort to continue disseminating its opposition to the moderate government (390). The publication described itself as a “periódico del partido liberal” and was dense, thorough, and wordy. The contributors wrote detailed analyses of

the positions of various political parties, as well as other content that would be of interest to educated readers, such as literary selections, theater reviews, international news, and stock market information. It also contained advertisements for fine consumer goods, such as encyclopedias, jewelry, and furniture, while at the same time marketing popular novels that dealt with poverty, suffering, and the mistreatment of the masses.

La Esperanza (1844-1874, ed. Pedro de la Hoz) was a “periódico absolutista, carlista... Defensor a ultranza del clero” (Tobajas 393) that advertised itself as a publication of the monarchy and featured royal decrees and news about the royal family. The categories were similar, such as politics, news, and literature, but the international sections were brief to make room for news about the provinces, the court system, government operations, and a “parte religiosa” where the paper would identify the saint pertaining to each day. It was a popular newspaper that ran every day except Sunday, and served as an organ of Carlism and traditionalist thought.

Small papers like *La Guindilla* (1842-1843) operated somewhat below the radar. “La Guindilla” was the pseudonym for the writer/editor Wenceslao Ayguals de Izco when he engaged in criticism against Baldomero Espartero. While Espartero and Ayguals were both liberal, *La Guindilla* claimed to speak for “los hombres de bien, los defensores del pueblo, los demócratas puros” (8).⁹ He was a populist figure who wrote almost the entire publication himself, speaking out against greed, corruption, the aristocracy, abuses of authority, and government-run press. While this particular publication was not terribly popular or long-lived, Ayguals does seem to echo modern sentiments about the future of the press when he says, “La imprenta no pudo resignarse a esta situación en lo presente, ni aceptar sus forzosas consecuencias en lo venidero” (84).¹⁰

El Católico (1840-1857) was a religious publication with the full title: “El Católico: periódico religioso y social, científico y literario, dedicado a todos los españoles, y con especialidad el Clero, amantes de la Religión de sus mayores y de su Patria.” It established from day one a clear expectation of its readers: religious, patriotic Spaniards who supported God and country above all else. It had much of the same content as *La Esperanza* in an easier-to-read format, and its political section would often just publish excerpts from other newspapers. An 1846 issue begins with a complaint about how many crimes one reads about in the *Diario de Avisos*, then goes on to explain that the youth are impure, impious, corrupted by non-religious attractions like plays, and that they would be better served by attending the first communion ceremonies of young children. The paper further appealed to a conservative audience by publishing news about the military, royal decrees, and news from government officials.

This is by no means an exhaustive list; there were many other publications of note during this time period, including *El Jorobado*, *El Guirigay*, *La España*, the satirical publication *Gil Blas*, and *El Imparcial*, a paper that grew so popular near the end of the century that Sagasta was once said to have quipped, when asked what was new, “No sé... Todavía no he leído *El Imparcial*” (García Barrón 79).

The content of these publications varied, and was not always exclusively political, but most of them did engage in political satire as an effective weapon in the fight for power (Tobajas 458). Natividad Abril Vargas referred to the 19th century as “el siglo del periodismo de las ideas, del apogeo del periodismo ideológico, es el siglo del periodismo de opinión, por excelencia” (50). These papers contained political caricatures, cartoons, impassioned pleas, and open endorsements, but it is perhaps the satirical essays that had the most impact, and are still discussed by scholars today. Cazottes identifies 1812 as the beginning of a period during which the sociopolitical situation of Spain brought forth an extremely vicious satirical press, largely aimed at the middle class (53).

Mariano José de Larra is perhaps the most famous author of 19th-century satirical essays. His *costumbrista* articles were full of attacks on censorship and the laziness and ineffectiveness of those in power. Larra was clever and used careful techniques to avoid the strict censorship of the time, such as adopting the government’s point of view and rhetorical strategies, while continuing to slyly mock politicians from numerous political parties and ridicule society in general (Tobajas, Cano Ballesta).

Some of the content published in newspapers was not as overtly political as Larra’s, but still demonstrated a politically oriented point of view. Serial novels like Wenceslao Ayguales de Izco’s *María o la hija del jornalero* and Antonio Flores’s *Fe, esperanza y caridad* demonstrated the suffering of the poor, specifically women, at the hands of those who would seek to exploit them. Novels like these did not openly endorse individual candidates or parties, but they were implicitly supportive of socialist ideals that were gaining traction throughout the century by calling attention to injustice and socio-economic tension (Zavala 13, 107). Socially minded serial novels were vital in shaping how readers saw the world, which in turn helped to develop their political sensibilities.

Regulation and Restriction

Over the course of the 19th century, newspapers were subject to extreme censorship and scrutiny, although there was little editorial oversight in terms of the quality of the content. Many publications included content that we would identify today as “spam” or “clickbait”—rumors, hoaxes, cliffhanger chapters, scandalous news like the murder of prostitutes, or outright insults between writers. However, if the content challenged the authority of the government or the Church in any way, publishers could be assured of repercussions. Any publication deemed seditious, subversive, or immoral could be suspended, and the primary editor held accountable (Tobajas 402). I posit that this preoccupation with censorship and suppression of political publications is proof of their actual influence on the reading public. Gómez Aparicio identifies two papers in particular that were influential in provoking the Revolution of 1868: *La Iberia* and *La Discusión* (404). These progressive publications were frequently under threat of suppression and censorship, and were suspended for a time as well.¹¹ Yet, in the case of *La Iberia*, it returned in the months preceding the Revolution of 1868 with the title *La Nueva Iberia*.

Resistance to authority, and specifically resistance to censorship, was a central facet of the 19th-century press. The reduced tariffs and improved efficiency led to easier

dissemination of content, but there were waves of suppression aimed at quelling revolutionary tendencies. In 1789, for example, it was prohibited to publish news of the French Revolution (Tobajas 105). In 1814, an absolutist decree suspended all publications except for *La Gaceta* and *El Diario de Madrid* and, during that time, the liberal press effectively disappeared as most of its writers and editors were arrested or left the country (Gómez Aparicio 119). In 1834, amidst unprecedented growth of new publications, the *Reglamento de Censura* declared that any writing that went against the monarchy, laws, or religion was forbidden, as well as those designed to incite rebellion (195). Writers continued to combat and circumvent these restrictions to publish their political ideas, with papers like *El Eco del Comercio* raising alarms about government restriction of the press and the necessity of opposing them. In 1842, editors of publications like *El Católico*, *La Guindilla*, *El Trono*, *El Eco del Comercio*, *El Herald*, *El Peninsular*, and *El Castellano* signed the *Declaración de la Prensa Independiente* as an act of political defiance. Naturally, papers affiliated with Espartero's progressive government or Isabel II's monarchy—such as *El Espectador*, *El Patriota*, and *La Iberia*—did not sign the document (Tobajas 360-361).

During the tumultuous transfers of political power, each party had publications that it actively supported and favored, and others that it attempted to restrict, suspend, or censor. As Habermas explains, “the state has to ‘address’ its citizens like consumers. As a result, public authority too competes for publicity” (195). With so much government involvement in the press, as with many periods of media history, we see a distrust of the “official” message and the notion that information was being controlled or selected for its audience. In the case of Spain, this was often true: *La Gaceta de Madrid* was effectively considered an official voice of the Spanish government in 1837-1838 (Gómez Aparicio 246). There was a sense of populism in the acquisition of information, due to the instability of political leadership and press laws. The growth of public discussion in salons, universities, and cafés allowed for political discussion to take place outside of the constraints of censorship (Ruiz Acosta 429), and generated new ideas that were circulated among like-minded people. Local writers had the ability to solidify them in written form and redistribute them to a reading public within a matter of days. This process was a product of a particular time in history because, over the course of the 19th century, the newspaper industry became significantly more powerful and lucrative, robbing publications of much of their local character and their “capacity to act as a platform for discussion within a community” (Standage 188). Before the press monopolies of the late 19th century, information was more democratic and relied on the active participation of a politically-minded reading public.

Reading Communities

A reading public is a difficult concept to investigate throughout history; reading is a private and individualistic act, and therefore “we still know very little about how access to printed materials affected human behavior” (Eisenstein 79). Jesús Martínez Martín (73) defines a reader as someone who has the ability to read (“saber”), the economic means to read (“poder”), and the desire to read (“querer”). Desire is difficult to quantify, but we know that in terms of economic means, reading was largely an activity of the

upper-middle classes and the wealthy. Even with price discounts for subscriptions, newspapers were expensive: “En 1870 *El Imparcial* valía 12 reales por trimestre; *La Correspondencia de España*, 24 reales; *La Época*, muy aristocrática, 48 reales” (Cazottes 48). This price range also explains the different audiences; papers that catered to a wealthy audience would reflect that in the subscription costs.

Reading ability was also limited to those with access to proper education. Martínez Martín cites a 75% illiteracy rate in Spain as a whole by 1857, but notes that literacy in Madrid was higher than the national average: somewhere around 40% due to the presence of more basic educational infrastructure (57-58).¹² The female literacy rate was about half of the male literacy rate (59), but there was still a good amount of reading material written with a female audience in mind, including the *novelas de folletín* and the short-lived publication *El periódico de las damas* in 1822 (Gómez Aparicio). Cazottes does speak of other publications that were intended for a female audience, such as *La Guirnalda* and *La Mariposa*, but most were not political in nature. Rather, they contained literary selections and news about subjects deemed appropriate for women, such as fashion and sewing. The century did see the emergence of a few political publications aimed at women, such as *Ellas*, a publication that only lasted for seven issues in 1851 but which “anuncia la prensa feminista con sus reivindicaciones del derecho de la mujer a la instrucción y al acceso a todas las labores” (52). A few women acted as directors of publications as well, including Ángela Grassi and Joaquina García Balmaseda, who co-directed *El Correo de la Moda*, and Faustina Sáez de Melgar, who directed *La Mujer*.¹³ Most political publications, on the other hand, were written for men, although it does not mean that women did not read them as well.

The estimated number of readers in Spain was around 60,000 in 1803, but grew to over 3,000,000 by 1860.¹⁴ Jesús Martínez Martín did one of the few extensive studies of 19th-century readers, in part by studying the private libraries of various middle- and upper-class professionals. He studied primarily books because shelves full of books were a common practice, but newspapers were ephemera that people didn't tend to keep (76). However, they were a pivotal force in the creation of reading communities; as Seoane and Saíz assert, “toda la actividad intelectual se concentra en el periodismo” (64). While people collected books for use in their private homes, newspapers were often read in public spaces, meaning that the number of readers is estimated to be significantly higher than the number of published issues. They could be read in cafés, taverns, reading rooms, and book clubs (105).¹⁵ Some texts were read aloud, permitting those who could not read to absorb the material, and the ideas presented in those texts were discussed in *tertulias*. As Habermas acknowledges, “political discussions are for the most part confined to in-groups, to family, friends, and neighbors who generate a rather homogeneous climate of opinion anyway” (213). While this may have been true, the sociability around reading allowed for the introduction of new ideas and lively debate. Juan Cano Ballesta speaks specifically about Mariano José de Larra and how his participation in literary *tertulias* allowed him to discuss new ideas that were disseminating through the country in spite of strict restrictions, stimulating his rebellious sentiments against repression and censorship (7).

Larra and many of his contemporaries expounded their ideas on societal ills in newspapers because publishing houses were seen as a central forum of debate about the state of the country (Fernández Barrero 31). One of the most common formats was the epistolary or missive, in which an author answers questions that have been submitted by the readers. Many publications had a section that gave their readers an opportunity to submit opinions, suggestions, criticism, and analysis as a platform for public debate (Yanes 250). Unfortunately, historians have encountered difficulties acquiring accurate statistics on these letters; it is hard to know how many were submitted, what percentage of them were published, and what criteria were used to select them (250). Often, the published letters are from correspondents or government officials, but some papers would publish letters from ordinary citizens if they corresponded with the worldview that the publication was promoting. In 1835, a *comunicado* published in *El Español* gave the opinion of a contributor only credited as “un suscriptor”:

Creo no me equivoco, si digo que V. ha sido de opinión que la ley sobre libertad de imprenta debía preceder a las otras que se han presentado por S. M. en su memorable discurso al abrir las presentes Cortes...en las naciones libres tienen sobre sus prerogativas á esta, que yo llamaré derecho imprescriptible. Bien sabido es que sin *la libertad de imprenta* valdrían muy poco el *habeas corpus*, el *jurado*, el *derecho de petición y de reunión* con que se ven favorecidos los ingleses. Un gobierno suspicaz y con intenciones retrógradas no teniendo aquella arma poderosa, acabaría pronto con estos otros elementos fundamentales de la seguridad y libertad de un pueblo. (5)¹⁶

Additionally, many authors published “letters” that were invented and written by the editor himself as a way of representing (or misrepresenting) a prevailing opinion of the time. The first edition of Wenceslao Ayguals de Izco’s *El Fandango*, for example, features a letter written by one “John Bull,” a supposed Englishman who had lived in Spain for forty years, which seems to be published solely for the purpose of making fun of “la perfección con que escribe el idioma de Cervantes” (“Desagravio” 11). The letter is clearly fabricated and simply used to introduce a poem called “El triunfo de un extranjero” and a cartoon featuring Englishmen fighting a duel with the heads of chickens.¹⁷



El Fandango. [Madrid] 15 Dec. 1844. p. 12.

While the letter may be fabricated, it is based upon certain urban “types” living in Madrid, as was the *costumbrista* tradition. Therefore, while not every letter came from the authentic voice of a citizen, they were informed by authors’ lived experience in the city and interaction with a wide range of individuals. Cano Ballesta—speaking again of Larra—frames it thusly:

Es esta necesidad de contacto con amplios círculos sociales la que empuja a Larra a echarse ‘por esas calles’ en busca de materiales para sus artículos, a ir de portal en portal, registrar, palpar, resolver hasta encontrar el objeto apetecido. Con ello está señalando la función básica de todo periodismo y de toda literatura: educar la conciencia del público y mantener el contacto entre la minoría intelectual y las masas populares. (43)

Here we see again the importance of social contact in the formation of ideas, and how the reciprocal action of influencing public opinion while drawing from it is a powerful force in the development of national identity.

This use of the media to establish or solidify national identity can certainly have negative repercussions, as 21st-century media have once again demonstrated. Narratives surrounding immigration and foreign influence can easily slip into an “us versus them” mentality, often seeking to attract readership from the residents of a nation by informing them of the evil that is present in other lands. Lou Charnon-Deutsch speaks of the press later in the 19th century, demonstrating how easily love of country can become hatred of an “other”:

In [...] one sense the mainstream press was a great success, in the main rallying the reading public around a set of issues and values that promoted the interests of the ruling parties. The other side of nationalism, which slips so easily into a rancid xenophobia, is the conviction of superiority and racial destiny, since nationalists vociferously profess love for their country and collectively find reasons to project that sentiment through unfavorable comparisons with other nations. (109)

This was often true of the press in the first half of the 19th century as well. Papers were full of negative sentiments toward foreigners, especially the English and French. Even liberal, forward-thinking papers were full of discriminatory caricatures, mocking letters, and affirmations of the superiority of the Spanish people.

Conclusion

The existence of the 19th-century periodical is strongly tied to the political chaos of the century and the desire of a frustrated audience to engage with a power structure over which they had little influence. By reading, discussing, and even contributing (directly or indirectly) to these publications, *madrileños* were responsible for the sudden, dramatic growth of a newspaper industry that was not yet controlled by media magnates. There

was an intense focus on lived experiences of real people, a need to demonstrate authenticity, and a premium placed on being a public writer who wrote for *el pueblo*. Marcelino Tobajas describes the press and its “afán casi obsesivo de la libertad” (134); historically, when writers stood up against leaders like they did with the *Declaración de la Prensa Independiente* in 1842, “el Poder empezaba a considerarse débil ante la fuerza creciente de la Prensa” (Gómez Aparicio 264). However, not all publications endorsed this declaration, and it is here that we see the fragmentation of perspective when it comes to the political press.

While there were publications that were considered “official,” such as the *Diario* and the *Gaceta*, there were hundreds of other papers available to the reading public during Isabel II’s reign. Readers could therefore choose publications that spoke to their interests and confirmed many of their existing points of view. In this way, something as monumental as revolution could be presented in very different ways. Martínez Martín claims that the predominant version disseminated in books by the liberal and moderate bourgeoisie was that of triumph, stripped of any tragic or radical notions (148), but other more conservative sources presented revolution quite differently. In a letter published in *El Pensamiento de la Nación* in 1844, the priest and author Jaime Balmes y Urpiá expressed his support for Catholics and the monarchs, proposing press reforms in order to avoid

el que se consuma en luchas estériles la inteligencia del país, se insulte sin cesar el gobierno, se alarmen continuamente los ánimos poniendo en peligro la tranquilidad pública, se ofenda la religión y la moral, se ataquen las reputaciones más bien sentadas, y se extienda la difamación hasta el sagrado del hogar doméstico. (cit. in Tobajas 387)¹⁸

Not only was the press his method of disseminating a political message, it was also the primary target of his proposals to silence the views of the other side.

Martínez Martín makes two assertions related to media production that explain the role of books and the press:

[El] libro no será a partir del siglo XIX – años 30 – el único y privilegiado medio de producción escrita. Los avances de la técnica contribuirán a que la prensa – periódicos y revistas – sea el elemento básico de difusión, y a que el medio periodístico se convierta en un vehículo de expresión, rápido y espontáneo y en muchas ocasiones sustantivo de aquél, incorporando en su contenido temas hasta entonces de tratamiento exclusivo de la cultura libresca. Prensa y libro coexistieron a partir de estas décadas, desvelando la complementariedad de ambos medios más que su exclusión. (23)

Later in the same book, he writes:

Los mensajes de los libros, y no sólo de ellos, ayudan a configurar lentamente los comportamientos colectivos, las actitudes y las visiones del mundo. El siglo XIX acelera estos mecanismos, no de forma súbita sino

con claro precedente ilustrado, y se acompaña de otro instrumento difusor de ideas: la prensa. Ambos serán en buena parte responsables de la divulgación y alimentación de los postulados ideológicos del liberalismo. También de otros. (74)

If we take into account that newspapers and books were complementary and coexisting methods of distributing information, and that books worked to shape a reading public's view of the world, it would follow that newspapers were also an important tool of forming readers' viewpoints on history and politics. Directors of publishing houses would acknowledge the political perspective of a publication in its own title, such as "periódico absolutista, carlista" (*La Esperanza*) or "periódico nacional...burlesco en grado superlativo contra todo vicho extranjero" (*El Fandango*). Readers could get a sense of exactly what kind of publication it was, and whether or not its contents would be offensive or pleasing to their sensibilities.

As mentioned earlier, there was a portion of print media dedicated to a female audience, whose authors wrote about issues deemed relevant to women. The 19th century press was finally arriving at a period of specialization, as Natividad Abril Vargas describes:

Tan pronto como empieza a consolidarse una industria editorial, se constata ya la primera gran división de audiencias en base a los mencionados intereses escindidos de los géneros y el sexo de la persona. Esta división dio origen a lo que hoy conocemos como 'prensa de información general' y 'prensa femenina.' Dentro de la primera tipología se encuentran las publicaciones que se definan como políticas, centradas en los acontecimientos públicos y coincidentes con los intereses del género masculino. En la segunda estaban las revistas denominadas domésticas, centradas en los intereses de los asuntos privados y destinados al público del género femenino. (46)

If one isolates that first category, "prensa general" or "publicaciones políticas," and applies the same concept of specialized publication for different sectors of the reading audience, a similar claim could be made that the division of audiences applied to political beliefs just as much as it did to gender. The selection of reading material was (and remains) an intentional act, and publishers created the content with their specific audience in mind.

When taking into account the social nature of reading and exchanging content, we must consider the impact of a reader's social circle, particularly with material as fleeting and temporally situated as newspapers. Numerous factors determine one's social circle within a city, such as gender, socioeconomic status, level of education, and urban geography, and those same factors affect the ways in which one would select reading material. Those reading choices were then reinforced by the spaces that *madrileños* inhabited; spaces like cafés were central to public debate and exchange of ideas, as well as one of the primary locations for reading. Thus, we can see how one's social circle would reinforce political beliefs while at the same time providing access to politically specialized reading material.

It is not perhaps as rigid as the echo chamber of 21st-century social media, but it does demonstrate that the origins of a “news bubble” are not strictly a 21st-century phenomenon.

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Notes

- ¹ See Michael Andor Brodeur and Mostafa M. El-Bermawy.
- ² See William Healy and Vanessa Otero.
- ³ While I will examine earlier and later publications, the central focus will be on the time period corresponding with the reign of Isabel II: 1833-1868.
- ⁴ Luisa Santamaría Suárez describes the problem beyond press histories, stating that “[c]uando se describe la era industrial de Europa en la primera mitad del siglo XIX, España suele quedar al margen de estas referencias” (26).
- ⁵ “Nada se puede asegurar en cuanto a la paternidad de *El Murciélagos*; se le atribuye en buena parte a don Luis González Brabo, el antiguo *Ibrahim Clarete*, y a don Antonio Cánovas del Castillo [...] no fue otra cosa que el portavoz de la prensa coaligada” (Tobajas 424).
- ⁶ Luisa Santamaría Suárez’s book gives an extensive description of the political press that did exist after 1868, a time period that saw the growth of socialist and anarchist parties as a result of increased class consciousness: “La aparición de esta conciencia de clase en España, se produce tardíamente, con relación a Europa, y suele fijarse en los años que siguieron a la Revolución septembrina de 1868” (29).
- ⁷ Lou Channon-Deutsch claims that before 1868, “strict government-imposed restrictions on the press and poorly-paid journalists working for two or more newspapers impeded the development of an independent press” (145). However, I maintain that in spite of these obstacles, the plurality of voices gave the press unprecedented influence and variety in the first half of the century. Speaking of the 1830s, María Cruz Seoane and María Dolores Saíz claim that the “existencia de la censura y la decidida voluntad de los periodistas de no dejarse vencer por ella determinan el carácter del periodismo de estos años” (92).
- ⁸ Gómez Aparicio 180, Seoane y Saíz 92, additional information from the Hemeroteca Digital of the BNE. Basic information in this section regarding newspapers (time periods, editors, political orientation) is taken from Gómez Aparicio, Seoane and Saíz, Tobajas, Zavala, and the Hemeroteca Digital.
- ⁹ 17 de julio de 1842 (Núm. 1).
- ¹⁰ 6 de noviembre de 1842 (Núm. 32).
- ¹¹ “[E]l Gobierno extendió la represión a los periódicos progresistas y demócratas, de los que quedaron fulminantemente suspendidos por la autoridad militar *La Soberanía Nacional*, *La Nación*, *La Democracia*, *La Iberia*, *El Pueblo*, *Las Novedades*, *La Discusión* y *Gil Blas*” (Gómez Aparicio 573).
- ¹² Jean-François Botrel concurs with regards to urban literacy, stating that “en 1860 el porcentaje de los alfabetizados es del 35.76% en las capitales de provincia...más del 21% de los alfabetizados españoles viven en una capital” (318).
- ¹³ Most publications intended for women were written by men; “No es hasta principios del siglo XX cuando las mujeres figuran en las redacciones de diarios y revistas como profesionales del periodismo” (Abril Vargas 49).
- ¹⁴ “En 1860, en España hay, oficialmente, 3.129.992 españoles que saben leer y escribir, o sea, prácticamente el 20% de la población total. Se está muy lejos de los 60.000 alfabetizados que, en 1803, calculaba Moreau de Jones” (Botrel 308).

¹⁵ In the same article in *El Católico* in which the author condemned the immorality of society, he later asks: “¿Qué ha de resultar cuando el café, el teatro, las casas de juego y otras [...] suelen ser a la vez la escuela donde mutuamente conferencian y se estimulan, y el lugar donde ensayan y ponen en práctica las lecciones que en tales libros y en tales escuelas aprenden?” (1).

¹⁶ Spelling errors are original to the text.

¹⁷ “John Bull” was an unflattering urban type of the time used to represent Englishmen. An additional clue that the letter is false is the fact that “John Bull” addressed his letter to a paper that did not yet exist, as it was published in the first issue.

¹⁸ “¿Cómo estamos? ¿Qué conducta deben seguir los hombres amantes de su patria?” *El Pensamiento de la Nación*, 24 julio 1844. As cited in Tobajas; original copy is missing from the Hemeroteca Digital of the BNE.

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