Newspapers in the 1950s

The American newspaper industry had enjoyed its greatest success and influence during the 1920s. Then, the economic problems of the Great Depression, followed by World War II and the simultaneous rise of radio, dimmed that luster. Some smaller papers enjoyed readership gains, but most major metropolitan dailies lost circulation between 1950 and 1960.

Newspaper Chains, Continued

The consolidation of older newspapers that characterized the 1940s continued into the 1950s. The economic pressures of successfully running a daily paper took their toll, and the era of the two-or-three-newspaper city was drawing to a close; most communities found themselves with only one newspaper. In the past, most cities had more than morning papers—they had evening papers, too, a concept that seems archaic today. In the 1950s, the papers that survived were mostly morning editions. Between 1945 and 1960, 350 daily newspapers went out of business, the majority of them evening papers. Some closed down entirely and others merged or consolidated with what was once the competition.

During the decade, many independent papers became parts of newspaper chains. Older chains like Hearst and Scripps-Howard continued to own significant groups of papers, but their overall holdings dipped as newspapers merged or went out of business. Relatively new groups such as Newhouse, Cox, Knight Newspapers, Ridder Publications, and Gannett acquired operations in many different locales. By the 1950s, chains controlled about half of the nation’s newspaper circulation, both daily and Sunday. However, competition remained strong in cities that still had multiple papers during the 1950s. One such city was New York, home to several broadsheets—The New York Times, the Herald-Tribune, the Journal-American, and the World-Telegram; and tabloids such as the Post, the Daily News, and the Daily Mirror. Chain ownership did not appear to bring about any sameness of product nor did it silence editors and columnists, as some had feared. Chains did, however, bring financial resources not always available to independent papers.

U.S. Newspapers on Strike

Newspapers commanded 37% of all U.S. ad revenues in 1950, but by 1960, the newspapers’ share of the advertising pie, both local and national, shrunk to 31%. This marked the first downward shift in newspaper advertising since the Great Depression. At the same time, TV’s share of the advertising pot skyrocketed from 3% in 1950 to about 30% in 1960. In addition to the loss of important advertising revenue, labor unrest brought about several devastating newspaper strikes. In 1953, a prolonged walkout over wages crippled newspapers in New York City. Detroit and Cleveland papers suffered strikes in 1955. After hard-fought negotiations failed, New York newspaper workers again walked out in the fall of 1956, and the city did without newspapers for 11 days before the two sides reached a compromise. These instances illustrate just a few of the crippling union-management clashes that swept across the country during the 1950s. At the end of each big disruption, the settlement invariably hit management hard, especially in the area of circulation. During these recurring strikes, readers frequently discovered they could do without a daily paper. When a strike was resolved, not all former readers returned; lower circulation meant lower ad rates, and that meant decreased revenue. Beleaguered owners...
frequently ended up raising prices, a move that drove away more readers.

Although gross revenues rose during the 1950s, expenditures climbed at an even faster rate, outweighing any increase in profits. As owners purchased new technology to cut costs, workers feared for their jobs, and any savings usually disappeared in a new and bitter round of labor negotiations. And as the number of personnel required to put out a modern newspaper dropped sharply, edgy labor unions exacted a stiff price in wages and benefits. Modernization and automation brought with them a host of "featherbedding" clauses in union contracts, which allowed unneeded workers to stay on in obsolete jobs. In the worst cases, several papers went out of business, furthering the decline of the American newspaper.

Publishers did put into play some innovative ideas during the decade, including increased use of color in the printing process. Both editorial and ad copy featured more color layouts. However, this technological progress came at a considerable cost. Aging printing equipment had to be replaced, and traditional lead type became a thing of the past. The composing room evolved from a noisy redoubt of hot metal into an operation relying on fewer and fewer people. But most analysts considered it money well spent as newspapers strove to compete more effectively with other media.

**Newspapers Fight the Cold War**

The Cold War and the near-hysteria of the 1950s Red Scare and McCarthyism—named for U.S. senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisconsin) and his now-discredited accusations of communist influence—dominated newspaper front pages during the decade. The hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), such as its investigations into communist infiltration of Hollywood, received wide coverage in U.S. newspapers. Depending on the paper one read, it may have seemed that Reds were hiding under every bed.

The great editorial cartoonist Herbert Block, better known as "Herblock," was among the first to challenge the stridency of the anticommunist campaign being waged by McCarthy. In stinging cartoons that began in 1950, Herblock created both the word and the idea of "McCarthyism"—unfounded allegations designed to create fear, a kind of bullying attitude toward opposing attitudes.

The 1950–1953 Korean War also gained extensive coverage, though strict censorship hobbled efforts to report an accurate picture of the hostilities. General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of Allied forces, kept a tight lid on all news, including the threat of courts-martial for reporters who broke his rules. Thus, nothing negative, including specific words like "retreat," saw print—even in a war that ended in a stalemate. The public could read about the war, but the information they received distorted the facts.

**Dear Abby and Ann**

A newspaper feature that greatly increased in popularity during the 1950s was advice to the lovelorn. Although such columns were not new to American newspapers, two women who happened to be twins—"Ann Landers" (Esther Friedman) and "Abigail Van Buren" (Pauline Friedman)—significantly increased the readership of such material. Both sisters enjoyed wide syndication, although their columns remained completely independent of each another. The "Ann Landers" column led the way, first appearing in the *Chicago Sun-Times* in 1955. Her sister followed a year later with "Dear Abby" in the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

The Friedman twins' columns were much more direct than their predecessors, eschewing the usually sappy
responses of earlier advice columnists. At times they could even be critical of the letters they received. Ann Landers and Dear Abby provided a fresh approach to journalism aimed at the "woman's page," and readers responded positively. The Friedmans' columns were widely read by women and men alike.

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Further Reading


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