

University of Louisville

ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository

Faculty Scholarship

2019

The Intermedial Politics of Handwritten Newspapers in the 19th-Century U.S.

Mark A. Mattes

University of Louisville, mark.mattes@louisville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/faculty>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [American Material Culture Commons](#), [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), [Graphic Communications Commons](#), [Journalism Studies Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Publishing Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), [United States History Commons](#), and the [Visual Studies Commons](#)

ThinkIR Citation

Mattes, Mark A., "The Intermedial Politics of Handwritten Newspapers in the 19th-Century U.S." (2019). *Faculty Scholarship*. 839.
<https://ir.library.louisville.edu/faculty/839>

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of ThinkIR: The University of Louisville's Institutional Repository. For more information, please contact thinkir@louisville.edu.

The Intermedial Politics of Handwritten Newspapers in the 19th-Century U.S.

Handwritten newspapers appeared in a variety of social contexts in the 19th-century U.S.¹ The largest extant portion of 19th-century handwritten newspapers emerged from home and school settings. More far-flung examples include those written aboard ships during exploratory and military voyages. Others were produced within institutions such as hospitals and asylums. Such works were written during times of privation, including life in an army regiment or a prisoner-of-war camp during the Civil War. At other times, handwritten newspapers accompanied efforts at westward settlement and transcontinental railway journeys. Impromptu papers could follow in the wake of natural disasters that knocked out print-based means of communication, and they could become part of a convent's social and spiritual life. For scholars of Native American studies, the most well-known handwritten newspaper (which might be better termed a literary journal) is *The Muz-ze-ni-e-gun*, or *Literary Voyager*, in which appeared works by the Ojibwe writer, Jane Johnston Schoolcraft.

Two key figures in recent Americanist scholarship on handwritten periodicals and books are Joan Newlon Radner and Karen Sánchez-Eppler, both of whom concentrate on the history of manuscript juvenilia, examples of which form the bulk of this chapter's archive. Radner's work provides a localized social history of New England communities in which handwritten periodical publication thrived. What is so compelling about Radner's work for the purposes of this study is her direct and sustained consideration of the interrelation of scribal and oral media practices in the publication of handwritten periodicals. Sánchez-Eppler is similarly sensitive to the interrelation of media. Her scholarship is profoundly useful in how it approaches the study of scribal culture as a means of historicizing how writers and readers theorized media themselves. Specifically, her scholarship figures

1 Thank you to V. Joshua Adams and Jean Lee Cole for their close readings and helpful suggestions. Thanks, as well, to the Early Literature and Material Texts Workshop at the McNeil Center for Early American Studies and the Library Company of Philadelphia, the Handwritten Newspapers as an Alternative Medium Workshop in Uppsala, Sweden, and the Paleofuturisms Reading Lab at the University of Louisville for providing feedback on various drafts of this chapter.

scribal practices as both elaborating existing meanings and developing new theories of how to use and think print in the 19th century. For example, she has read manuscript juvenalia as a kind of training for the later navigation, reproduction, and expansion of a 19th-century documentary culture that helped underwrite the social order of adult life – a process she calls “practicing for print.” More recently, Sánchez-Eppler has focused on how a variety of scribal works simultaneously rethink the signifying possibilities to which 19th-century industrial publishing put the material practices of printing, bookbinding, and related media. In their “scripted and unscripted” uses of normative documentary culture, such writers constituted what Sánchez-Eppler describes as an “unpublished republic” heretofore unrecognized by American literary history.²

This chapter acknowledges the importance of scribal practice’s crucial role in producing new futures for print. At the same time, this chapter recasts the study of 19th-century scribal works. Rather than seeing such works as “for print,” or “unpublished,” this chapter situates handwritten newspapers within another history: the futures of handwriting. This chapter combines Sánchez-Eppler’s interest in alternative historical understandings of normative print media with Radner’s explicitly interrelational approach to media practices in order to explore how handwritten newspapers provide evidence of how historical actors theorized handwriting itself during the 19th century.³ Crucially, handwriting cannot be understood merely via handwriting. Such an analysis requires a close attention to what Kirsti Salmi-Niklander describes as the “intense interaction between manuscript, print and oral communication and performance”⁴ that characterizes 19th-century handwritten newspapers. This kind of attention is what Andrew Piper calls an “intermedial literacy,” which “move[s] us away from the study of individual media and draw[s] attention instead to larger media “ecologies,” how individuals express themselves and interact with one another by using a variety of different media, modes of speech, and languages.”⁵ An intermedial approach, and a recognition of historical scribes’ own intermedial literacies, can “help us understand how people potentially encode meaning” in their newspapers via “any number of their media ecology’s” technologies and practices.⁶

2 In addition to Radner 2010; and Sánchez-Eppler 2008 and 2018, key works on 19th-century handwritten newspapers in American contexts include Atwood 1999, and Atwood, *Handwritten Newspapers Project*; Berkey, “‘Prisoner & Co.’s steam press of thought’: Handwritten Prison Newspapers of the Civil War”. Paper presented at The Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists’ fourth biennial conference held at Pennsylvania State University, 2016; Blum 2014; Parker 2007; and Smith 2011. For recent analyses of 19th-century amateur journalism and periodical production in American contexts, see Cohen 2013; 2014; and Isaac 2012.

3 The key historical work on 19th-century handwriting in U.S. contexts is Thornton 1996.

4 See introduction in this volume.

5 Piper 2009, 16.

6 Mattes 2018, 713.

The intermediality of the handwritten newspaper is on clear display in Samuel H. Jenks, Jr.'s *The Fire Fly* (1842), held in the *Robert Walsh Papers* at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Jenks published his handwritten newspaper at age fourteen. His father, Samuel Haynes Jenks (1789–1863) had been the editor and publisher of a professional, printed newspaper, the *Nantucket Inquirer*. Interestingly, the father wrote a regular column for the *Inquirer*, also called *The Fire Fly*, and so it seems the junior Jenks was inspired by his father's work as a publisher and an author.

Jenks, Jr. produced each (extant) issue of his *Fire Fly* on a 9.5x15-inch sheet, which was pre-printed with the paper's masthead. He folded the sheet in half to create a folio – two pages, four sides. The third issue of *The Fire Fly* contains a minstrelized sermon accompanied by a grotesque, hand-drawn image of an African-American in a pulpit. The sermon, like the image, is deeply racist: "A man dat born of a woman, hab long time to lib; he trowble ebery day too much; he grow up like a plantin, he cat down like a bannana." It is possible that such minstrel humor was a staple of Jenks' paper; in issue number six, he included an additional "Negro Sermon," wherein he named the preacher, "Deacon Snowball."

According to the editor, *The Fire Fly's* images were created using engravings that were either made or obtained by a fictional job printer, "Simon Sheepshanks," whose advertisement appears in the image. Sheepshanks had recently returned from London, where he had access to the latest and greatest printing images, and from which he brought back a number of engravings – engravings that may have included the "Negro Sermon."

Jenks' image and mock sermon together call forth a socially myopic readership by attacking African-American evangelical publics and communicative practices. Jenks Jr. imagined a future for an American civic life that rejects African American oral performances as legitimate forms of public discourse while reserving such legitimacy for his handwritten newspaper, and for (Anglo-American) newspapers more generally. Of course, Jenks' *Fire Fly* is a failed attempt to repress how the antebellum circumscription of black lives – legal and otherwise – fueled black counterpublicity.⁷ As such, Jenks' handwritten newspaper reveals how imagined communities, and the futures toward which they are oriented, are in part contingent upon the cultural politics that emerge during the integration of new and existing media.

The racist imagined community of *The Fire Fly* shows how handwritten newspapers could be politically charged, poetic responses to the increasing prevalence of new communicative forms and practices. Building on extant scholarship that treats handwritten newspapers as evidence for understanding the history of the news and the social life of specific communities, institutions, or demographics, this chapter claims that works like *The Fire Fly* also tell us a great deal about the politics of technology, poetics, and media. In the remaining portions of this chapter, I examine how their writers and editors' various responses to changes in printing, imaging, communications, transportation, postal exchange, as well as various modes

7 For studies of 19th-century, black counterpublic responses to racist media, see Cohen & Stein (eds) 2012.

of oral publication, entailed a common theme – that 19th-century media could provide new opportunities for imagining and circumscribing the publics that handwritten works forge. These futures for handwriting were crucially rooted in the newspapers' modes of production and transmission and their material and visual elements – handwritten and illustrated content on single, folded, and/or sewn sheets. Subsequent sections of this chapter more deeply explore the politics entailed by the temporalities that these intermedial texts posit for both their readers and for manuscript practice itself. I focus on three more such works – Elizabeth Waterhouse Allen and Lucy (Allen) Powers' *The Gleaner* (1846–1850); *The Ladder* (1849–1853), written by four brothers of the Whiteman family in Philadelphia; and James Johns's *Vermont Autograph and Remarker* (1832–1874) – as well as a representation of a handwritten newspaper, *The Pickwick Portfolio*, described by Louisa May Alcott in her novel, *Little Women*, and based in part on Alcott's own experiences in producing manuscripts with her sisters.

Practicing for an intermedial print culture

The Gleaner was a handwritten newspaper published in Massachusetts by Elizabeth Waterhouse Allen and Lucy (Allen) Powers. The Allen sisters came from “a Congregationalist/Unitarian family of good education, excellent character, and moderate means.” The sisters' interest in producing this periodical was likely encouraged by their mother, Lucy Clark Ware Allen, who “acted as the manager and taskmaster necessary to the production of two early student newspapers – *The Meteor* and *The Nosegay*, printed in 1835–1836.”⁸ As young adults, Elizabeth and Lucy published *The Gleaner* from 22 April 1846, until 5 February 1850. The newspaper, which is held by the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts, comprises a running correspondence between the Allen women, complete with personae and rules for their creation, short fiction, letters and dispatches, poems, riddles, articles, and obituaries. *The Gleaner's* mode of publication and circulation involved the passing of a book between two sisters who met and read the issues aloud after writing each edition in the columns of a bound, pre-ruled, commercially available octavo. The production schedule started with small intervals of one or two weeks. These intervals gradually lengthened until it soon took one or two months to put out an issue.

One particularly interesting article from the recurring column, “Extracts from a Correspondence,” advocates for the penny post.⁹ Written under the pseudonym, “Dragonfly,” Lucy offered a nationalist theology of communications: “Only establish the one-cent postage, and every man, woman, and child, would become a scribbler – paper mills would become as numerous as cotton, and pens would run as spindles do now.” Dragonfly's

8 Quotations from the finding aid for the *Allen-Johnson Family Papers*.

9 This article appears in *The Gleaner* vol. 2, no. 11, which was issued sometime between 8 February and 22 March 1848. The date of publication is not included in this issue.

fantasy entailed the near-infinite production of communications “by pen and ink, and transported by steam,” wherein, “[f]eeling, thought, sentiment, [and] narrative, will be flying about the country in every imaginable shape and garb.”

According to Dragonfly, postal reform would animate vast structural changes in writing culture as people took advantage of the chance to send inexpensive letters to one another. Much like Elizabeth and Lucy were doing in miniature, Dragonfly imagined that the nation itself would engage in the “self-culture and education” afforded by participation in written correspondence. Moreover, the amplification of writing’s pedagogical register, according to Dragonfly, “would be in proportion to the pleasure [men and women] received in sending and receiving communications.” All of this,

would bind together the different parts of the land...by a thousand bonds of affection and goodwill, crossing and interlacing each other, till, in a short time, thro’ the multiplication thus of individual ties and sympathies, the whole country would become wove into one solid, compact body, that no power could tear asunder. And that is just what we ought and must be. Railroads, electric telegraphs, and cheap postage will do it.¹⁰

The Gleaner’s Dragonfly articulates the politics of practicing for print within the rhetorical registers of a sentimental culture that existed in the decades preceding the U.S. civil war. A similar case of practicing for print grounds the most well-known *fictional* handwritten newspaper from the 19th century, *The Pickwick Portfolio* described in Louisa May Alcott’s novel, *Little Women* (1868–1869). The *Portfolio* is published by the Pickwick Club, a secret society populated by the pseudonymous authors Samuel Pickwick, Augustus Snodgrass, Tracy Tuppmann, and Nathaniel Winkle, key figures in Charles Dickens’ *The Pickwick Papers*. Under these names, characters Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy March produce miscellaneous articles, including literary works, news reportage, advertisements, announcements, and moral advice.¹¹

The dealings of the Pickwick Club negotiate the gender politics of women’s publication. Take, for example, the publication mode of their *Portfolio*: reading aloud. Reading aloud to a semi-private circle of collaborators, or in more expansive forums such as schoolrooms or the public spaces of villages, was a key feature of numerous mid-19th-century handwritten newspapers.¹² One can observe this tradition on display in Alcott’s novel when the oldest sister, Meg, reads the *Portfolio* to her sisters. Significantly, Meg reads aloud in the persona of Samuel Pickwick. Importantly, Alcott’s characters do not simply reproduce the hetero-normative social order of mid-19th-century life; instead, through such “queer performances,” they develop strategies

10 Allen & Powers, *The Gleaner* vol. 2, no. 11.

11 Alcott alludes not only to Dickens’ novel; she was also drawing on her earlier life experiences with her sisters in producing handwritten family newspapers. In fact, poetry that appears in the fictional *Pickwick Portfolio* was based on a work Alcott had authored years earlier for such efforts. See Shealy 1992.

12 See Radner 2010.

for women's entrance into sites of public discourse by pseudonymously inhabiting the male-constructed space of the newspaper.¹³

The gender politics of women's writing and publication are particularly at stake when Jo – as Augustus Snodgrass – proposes to the rest of the Pickwick Club that they invite the neighbor boy and romantic interest, Laurie, to join their secret society. Meg and Amy object, with Amy (as Nathaniel Winkle) stating: “We don't wish any boys; they only joke and bounce about. This is a ladies' club, and we wish to be private and proper.”¹⁴ Jo's rejoinder is equally telling of the anxieties over women's writing and publication Alcott is working through in her depiction of the club: “Sir! I give you my word as a gentleman, Laurie won't do anything of the sort. He likes to write, and he'll give a tone to our contributions, and keep us from being sentimental, don't you see?”¹⁵ Jo's response to Amy is to defend against the potential criticism that she and her sisters are, as the fiction writer Nathaniel Hawthorne would have it, “scribbling women.”¹⁶ Ultimately, Jo wins the day and secures a unanimous vote for Laurie's entrance into the Club. And Laurie's membership indeed provides the antidote to Jo's aesthetic concerns about her compositions: “[Laurie] certainly did add ‘spirit’ to the meetings, and ‘a tone’ to the paper, for his orations convulsed his hearers and his contributions were excellent, being patriotic, classical, comical, or dramatic, but never sentimental.”¹⁷

It is tempting to read Alcott's version of the Pickwick Club as a utopian rhetorical drag show that enables a relatively progressive social politics with regards to women's publication. However, Laurie's major aesthetic contribution to the Pickwick Club – his modeling of a “never sentimental” spirit and tone – seems to be a retrograde solution for countering lowered expectations of women's writing and mitigating the so-called problem of women engaged in public writing and reading practices while among men. Indeed, Jo's sense that her writing improves due to Laurie's compositions seems to grant Hawthorne's misogynist premise. It is certainly at odds with the narrator's tone: “Jo regarded them [Laurie's orations] as worthy of Bacon, Milton, or Shakespeare, and remodeled her own works with good effect, *she thought*.”¹⁸

Alcott's implicit critique of Jo's praise for Laurie's orations is made clearer when one turns to the other woman reading aloud in Alcott's chapter – Miss Oranthy Bluggage – a character in one of the *Portfolio's* fictional advertisements: “Miss Oranthy Bluggage, the accomplished, Strong-Minded Lecturer, will deliver her famous Lecture on ‘Woman and Her Position,’ at Pickwick Hall, next Saturday evening, after the usual performances.”¹⁹ “Oranthy Bluggage” was one of Alcott's “parodic” pseudonyms for publishing

13 Alcott 1868–1869, 73.

14 Alcott 1868–1869, 153.

15 Ibid.

16 See Nathaniel Hawthorne to William D. Ticknor, 19 January 1855, in Hawthorne 1987, 304.

17 Alcott 1868–1869, 156.

18 Ibid. Emphasis in italics is mine.

19 Alcott 1868–1869, 152.

her early writing. Alcott scholar Elaine Showalter describes this name as “self-mocking...revealing [Alcott’s early] fear that female intellectualism and strong-mindedness would invite ridicule.”²⁰ At the same time, it is important not to see such self-mocking as a mere defense mechanism. Alcott’s incorporation of the Bluggage pseudonym into the handwritten newspaper of *Little Women* is a rebuke to her younger self, as well as to both men and women who, like her characters, Laurie and Jo, come to see normatively masculine forms of publication across media as legitimizing strong-minded intellectual content produced by women.

Perhaps Alcott’s most compelling rebuke to normatively masculine forms of expression comes, though, in the power inversion represented by the pseudonyms drawn from Dickens’ novel. When Laurie is allowed to join the March sister’s club, he takes the name of Sam Weller. In Dickens’ novel, Weller is technically a subordinate of Mr. Pickwick, and as such, potentially inverts the gender politics represented by Laurie’s compositions. Yet Alcott’s rebuke has its limits. In Dickens’ work, Weller is often credited with the clear sightedness often denied to the titular character, Pickwick – a clear sightedness that seems borne out by the supposedly superior aesthetics of Laurie’s oral performances.

Other futures for handwriting

The failed utopia of the Pickwick Club in *Little Women* partially supports a practicing-for-print reading. However, practicing for print through handwritten newspapers did not necessarily entail subordinating oneself to the dominant social politics of one’s culture. After all, Laurie’s subordinate status in the March sisters’ club orients mid-19th-century readers of Alcott’s novel toward a future in which women’s publications are subsequently consumed by both men and women. As such, Alcott’s representation of handwritten news points to the ways in which “[hand]writing in Victorian American was charged with tensions generated by changing gender roles as well as by a changing social and economic order.”²¹

More generally, *The Pickwick Portfolio* demonstrates how scribes could combine dominant and alternative political registers while practicing for print. Such was the case in the Whiteman brothers’ *The Ladder* (1849–1853), published in or near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and held in the collections of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.²² The main editor and publisher, John G. Whiteman, produced the newspaper along with his brothers, William, James, and Horace. The brothers ranged in age from eleven to twenty at the beginning of the publication’s run. They produced an assortment of articles on natural history, museum exhibitions, past and current technology, and recent events. They also wrote poetry, satire, stories, puzzles, riddles, and reflections on holiday festivities. Many issues include sketches, watercolors,

20 Showalter 1997, xxvi–xxvii.

21 Thornton 1996, 43.

22 See *Whiteman Family Papers*.

or colored pencil illustrations. Often, multiple issues were bound together in single volume or multi-volume books. Sometimes these books contain works written and inserted at later dates. These handmade books measure approximately three inches by four inches. They have paper covers and hand-stitched bindings.

The Ladder, as a kind of practicing for print, involves a scribal “culturing” of the social order. The religiously inflected improvement that the Whiteman brothers wished to establish in themselves – as the producers and as the main readers of the newspaper – is succinctly articulated by the title and masthead of the inaugural edition, in which a ladder ascends to the heavens.

Many of the Whitemans’ articles and illustrations offer readers a temperance-reformist vision of their potential futures, especially in the early years. In the first book, in which are bound volumes one and two of the newspaper, the brothers illustrate what awaits those who are open to the moral outlook of *The Ladder*: salvation, here represented as a suit-and-top-hat-wearing, print-newspaper-reading figure of socioeconomic respectability. For those closed to such a vision, because they do not read *The Ladder*, the Whitemans offer a warning – you court self-destruction, here represented as a scraggly inebriate fond of gin. In volume ten, there appears another image, which depicts the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The image suggests what awaits those who persist in drinking: hellfire. A man stands in the middle of the illustration, surrounded by flaming thunderbolts while holding a bottle of liquor. In moments such as these, the Whitemans articulate a very clear social politics with regard to newspapers: one must make a choice in the world – read to improve one’s self, or die.

And yet, the Whiteman brothers did not only inculcate normative beliefs about the relation of reading and writing literacies to upward-striving, middle-class, Christian life. *The Ladder*’s long-term material production – from newspaper to bound volumes to altered books – reveals a kind of reimagining of the mid-century documentary culture that undergirded the perceived power of the liberal individual to act on one’s own (financial) behalf. Consider, for example, an insertion into volume nineteen of the *The Ladder*. The Whitemans altered a blank form to craft an imaginative world in a way that has seemingly nothing to do with becoming an adult.²³

Before the Whiteman brothers used the blank form, it had already been used as a financial instrument to transfer an amount of silver totaling thousands of dollars. The form is cut length-wise, the bottom is trimmed, and the remaining portion is folded across its width into a folio. On the backside of the used blank is the writing of a Whiteman brother. The recto of the folio’s first leaf lists a series of “Addenda” with numbers listed on the left and the corresponding textual addenda on the right. The addenda continue on the verso of the folio’s second leaf.

The addenda-laden blank serves as a sleeve for a poem that runs 236 lines across two signatures – one a folio, the other an accordion fold with three

23 For a study of how handwriting and other material traces found among used blank forms illuminate “the subjective life of their users,” see Brown 2017. Quotation from page 229.

panels. The poem makes clear that the written addenda on the blank are actually revisions to an original composition. The numbers of the addenda correspond with the line numbers of the verse that the repurposed blank encloses. The resulting work is “Canto One” in a projected mock epic, “Mr. Wolfe, or, Beef in the Larynx.”

So, what does a poem about a guy who almost chokes to death on a piece of beef have to do with the politics of *The Ladder*? It helps to consider the temporalities of the blank form. Blanks, as Peter Stallybrass puts it in a recent lecture on printing history, show how “printing precedes manuscript.” Stallybrass writes:

[B]lank forms reverse... [a] before/after model [of manuscript and print]. Printing records what is already... The fact that we ‘fill in’ or ‘complete’ blank forms registers the pastness of what has been printed and their manuscript future. The blank spaces are there because we do not know in advance... Blank forms transform ‘manuscript’ into the technology of the future.²⁴

The writing in the proscribed spaces of the Whiteman’s repurposed blank form activated a future involving the transfer of silver specie from one party to another at some point in 1853. This is a transaction of adulthood that the top-hat wearing reader of *The Ladder* can get behind!

But the Whiteman brothers’ use for the blank form goes further. The revision and enclosure of the poem within the blank renders the bound volume of newspapers as a site where multiple futures for manuscript practice are oriented toward radically different social politics. The “Addenda” to “Mr Wolfe, or, Beef in the Larynx,” retools the transformative power of handwriting into the technology of a different future – a future unimagined by the “what is already” that the printed elements of the blank register. The telos of the blank form is fundamentally altered by the scribes of *The Ladder* – scribes whose world-making simultaneously inverts an understanding of such written juvenilia as practicing for the print culture of, in this case, finance. Instead, what we find in the blank/poem placed among the pages of *The Ladder* is a rich example of play for play’s sake. To be clear, this repurposing of a printed-and-handwritten financial instrument is not a self-conscious subversion of capitalism. The Whitemans’ use for the blank does reveal, though, how this written culture’s literary and material practices could animate possible futures for manuscript that the proscribed sections of the printed form at first seem to foreclose.

The Whiteman brothers’ repurposing of a used blank form not only illuminates how the work’s intermedial conditions shape its politics. Its insertion into a volume of *The Ladder* simultaneously suggests that the newspaper’s political registers may have been unevenly available to its writers and readers over time. This insertion encourages a juxtaposition between, on the one hand, the futures of manuscript entailed by the blank in both its use as a financial instrument and as a list of addenda used to

24 Stallybrass, “Miræus Lecture: ‘Why Printing Precedes Manuscript’”. Paper presented at Flanders Heritage Library, 2013. Also see Stallybrass 2007; 2008.

bind a poem, and on the other hand, the media theory that the Whitemans espouse in moments such as its cartoon on newspaper reading. Crucially, the blank and the poem it encloses are inserted among multiple issues that were bound together after their initial publication. Moreover, the processes and rationales for assembling and reassembling the Whiteman's pages in the ways that enable my preceding interpretation are not completely knowable. It is unclear, therefore, whether the political juxtapositions entailed by the blank and the newspaper were an interpretive consideration for mid-19th-century writers and readers of *The Ladder*.

The changing artifactual condition of *The Ladder* reveals how the intermedial politics of handwritten newspapers – and of material texts more generally – are always ephemeral. In this respect, James Johns's *Vermont Autograph and Remarker* is unique. Extant issues of the *Autograph*, copies of which can be found at the American Antiquarian Society and the Newberry Library, record an editorial self-consciousness about the intermedial conditions through which one scribe shaped and reshaped his authority as a writer and publisher over four-plus decades of adulthood.²⁵ Johns "pen-printed" numerous works, including *The Green Mountain Miscellany*, or *Huntington Magazine* and the *History of Huntington*, but by far his most prodigious venture was the *Autograph*. [Figure 1.]²⁶ The *Autograph's* content included "stories, poems, essays, local history and folklore, acrostics, and political commentary," ranging from support for "the abolition of slavery," to "specimens of other letters than Roman," to the crotchety disquisition, "Things I don't like."²⁷

Johns published his handwritten newspaper from 1832 until 1874, usually in runs of one copy per edition, or as he put it in his 1 October 1864 edition, "one copy of a date is all I pretend to get out at a time." In addition to local distribution of these single copies, Johns claimed to have penned multiple copies on occasion in order to exchange copies with publishers of printed periodicals. In addition to sending his newspaper to publishers, Johns sent at least one copy to a federal political representative. Sometimes he kept a publishing schedule of five days per week, though this level of output was likely quite rare since it sometimes took him upwards of half a day to pen one copy.²⁸ Johns used various formats and materials in making his *Autograph*, such as "white writing paper...sometimes folded in two leaves, and sometimes broadside...sometimes issued...larger; that is to say half a sheet, and is in four or five instances on a whole sheet of foolscap paper folded, and occasionally I nowadays sometimes make eight pages of it."²⁹

Political participation was a major impetus for producing the *Autograph*. For example, Johns sent copies of the *Autograph* to a member of the Vermont

25 Additional copies can be found at the University of Vermont, the Newberry Library, and the New-York Historical Society.

26 For an in depth study of Johns's career as an author-publisher in script and print, see Vail 1933. Also see Federal Writers' Project 1937.

27 Johns, *Autograph* (1 October 1864; 24 June 1867).

28 See Citro 1999, 3–6.

29 Johns, *Autograph* (1 October 1864).

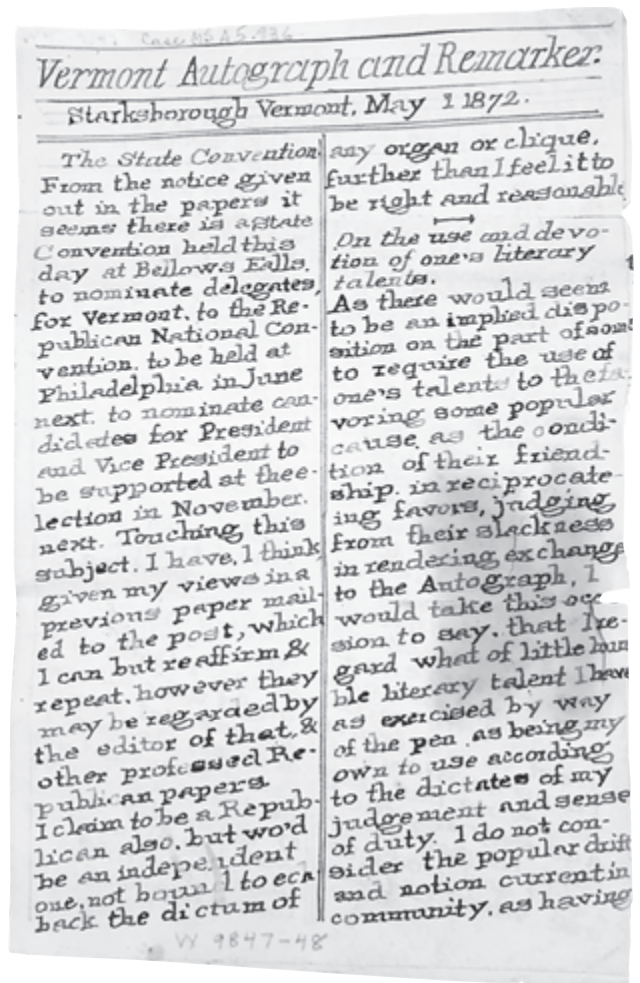


Figure 1. Vermont Autograph and Remarker (1872) – Example of Johns’s “pen-printed” newspaper. Image courtesy of the Newberry Library.

delegation to the U.S. House of Representatives, James Smith Morrill, in order to strengthen the pro-Union sentiments of likeminded legislators. In a 4 February 1861, letter to Morrill, Johns writes: “I take the liberty once again of forwarding you one of my papers, the Vermont Autograph and Remarker, hoping that the receipt and perusal of one among you Northern Republicans in Congress will not be unacceptable as showing what a Green Mountain boy has to say on the subject of the rupture at the south.”

The tenor of Johns’s desire to engage in politics can be discerned in the early hopes he held for the *Autograph*. The 10 October 1834, edition opens with a telling quotation from the Book of Job: “I also will show you mine opinion. –Elihu.” Here Johns refers to the biblical Elihu. Specifically, he refers to Elihu’s decision to overcome of his reticence to speak in order to condemn what he sees as the faulty reasoning in both Job and his friends’ explanations for God’s treatment of the titular figure. Through this reference, Johns articulates a feeling of being compelled to affect public discussion and

opinion about crucial matters – a feeling that is prevalent in his 1860s articles in favor of abolition and the maintenance of national union.

Scribal practices, for Johns, were critical in reaching readers, shaping public discourse, and affecting matters of political significance – whether through editorials regarding “the great topic of the day,” the U.S. Civil War, or through columns on more prosaic topics such as children’s literature and education or federal fiscal policy.³⁰ As such, Johns constantly marked issues of the *Autograph* with unapologetic testimonials on behalf of “pen-printing.”

The 10 October 1834, *Autograph* emblemizes Johns’s zeal for theorizing handwriting, especially as it relates to printing: “...the reader may be assured that every paragraph is composed and written by the Editor himself and that too without having first to draft it on another piece of paper which is more than can be said of the hundreds and thousands of super royal and imperial folios issued from the press.” Here Johns argues for his originality and genius by favorably contrasting the temporality of the *Autograph*’s composition against the voluminous output of presses. In his accounting, printing-press output is to be devalued because it requires a transitional step from medium to medium – from manuscript to print (in his telling, at any rate). Johns later elaborates on the significance of this transitional step:

Writing with a pen was the only method of communicating ideas on paper till within four hundred years ago when the art of printing with types was invented; and even all the mighty works of learning that are issued from the press, are originally written with pen and ink under the author’s own hand so that the world is still indebted to that simple instrument the pen for all the printed knowledge that ever filled a library from the first invention of letters down to the present day.³¹

Johns asserts the primacy of handwriting over printing by “historicizing” the relationship of pen to print. He claims that his readers should celebrate handwriting’s role in the production of knowledge in the terms of debt and credit. Johns’s economic diction is helpful in thinking about the relationship between his meditations on handwriting and printing and his correspondences with other publishers. His theories on handwriting and printing both respond to and shape the micropolitics at work in these exchanges.³² As Johns put it on 1 October 1864: “The papers so issued I send mostly to other editors of ordinary newspapers.” Johns exchanged works with Joel Munsell, for example, a New York printer, publisher, and editor of numerous works, as well as a historian of printing and paper. Johns also engaged in periodical exchanges and letter correspondences with Ticknor and Fields.

Extant copies of the *Autograph* reveal Johns’s deep frustration over his exchanges involving Ticknor and Fields’ publication, *Our Young Folks*,

30 Johns, *Autograph* (1 October 1864).

31 Johns, *Autograph* (10 October 1834).

32 For a study of the authorial politics of 19th-century periodical exchange networks, see Jackson 2008.

a print magazine of children's literature. In his 4 December 1866, issue, immediately following mention of "a former occasion in forwarding one of my papers to the publishers of 'Our Young Folks,'" Johns complained that "there are those among the type & press publishers who turn up their nose at, and give the cold shoulder to any production on paper that [does not] come in the imposing form of great sheets as big as a table cloth print on types in thousands of copies." On the next page, Johns acknowledged his previous receipt of a copy of *Our Young Folks* "sometime last year," and expressed his desire for an exchange copy of the same title upon Ticknor and Fields' receipt of the 4 December 1866, *Autograph*.

All was not well, however, for Johns then complained about receiving too many exchange papers. Johns, directly addressing Ticknor and Fields, demanded on 4 December 1866, that they, "tender exchange only in reasonable proportion to the extent I am able to furnish it." Here Johns claimed that he was being overburdened with the lengthy task of producing multiple copies of his own work in order to adequately reciprocate the publisher's largesse.

By 17 May 1867, Johns's perception of Ticknor and Fields had taken a turn for the worse. This sentiment pervades a column in which he writes that publishers have directly engaged in written correspondence with himself: "I have had ere now some considerable experience of intercommunication with divers publishers in Boston, (I mean by mail, for I never was there myself,) and have found some of them obliging and courteous, at least for a time. Have had some fly off the handle because I didn't flatter them to the extent of their vanity." It is almost certain that Johns is writing about Ticknor and Fields in this passage, for elsewhere in the same issue he writes, "I feel rather just now impelled to recur to a subject nearer to heart suggested by the neglect with which my last *Autograph* mailed to the publishers of 'Our Young Folk[s]' has been treated that concern where I ventured again to bespeak the favor of an exchange."³³

Johns went on to speculate on the lack of reciprocity in his 17 May 1867, issue. One possibility that he considered was whether "they took exception to something expressed" in the *Autograph*. The particular controversy to which Johns referred was his critical reading of *Our Young Folks's* inclusion of youth fiction that he felt might have dangerous effects on children's morals and manners. In response to the possibility that Ticknor and Fields took offense to his arguments, Johns attempted to shift the micropolitics of paper exchange in his favor by claiming the highroad. In the same 17 May 1867, issue, he posed his understanding of an editor's ethical relationship to one's content in light of the exchange economies in which such an editor might be engaged: "I do not and should not back down to get any publisher's favor. It is ones duty as well as right in what he says, or put on paper for others to give his opinion such as it is without mincing. Short of this he cannot be a straight forward man." In articulating his vision of what it means for a newspaper

33 Considering that in his 4 December 1866, edition, Johns directly addressed Ticknor and Fields with a clear expectation of reply, it is likely that he also sent a copy of his 17 May 1867, issue to them.

writer to navigate textual exchanges among publishers successfully, the stakes became no less than the gender politics of authorship.

Johns also suggested in his 17 May 1867, issue that Ticknor and Fields refused send a copy of *Our Young Folks* because they were critical of the size and mode of the *Autograph*'s production. Such speculation provided another opening to assert the vitality and viability of handwriting:

Respecting what may be said or thought by connoisseurs in literature of one's expending time and pains with pen on such a small matter as the little *Autograph*...I would just observe that tho' I am conscious of its inferiority in size and style...It is no more good reason against one's using his pen in imitation of printing because there are presses and type to be had, than there is for our not condescending to go on foot at all because there are horse carriages and railroad cars to ride in.³⁴

Beginning with a pejorative remark, "connoisseurs in literature," Johns imagined Ticknor and Fields as looking down their noses at him and his *Autograph*. Johns then pretended to agree with Ticknor and Fields that his publication format is "inferior." Finally, Johns developed an analogy between old and new publishing technologies and transportation technologies in order to reject the assumption of inferiority which he accuses Ticknor and Fields of harboring. In the analogy, Johns argued that the speed, efficiency, and uniformity promised by advocates for a practice or technology do not preclude the use of the one it supposedly supersedes. Crucially, Johns's point is not merely theoretical. It is important to remember that he had directly experienced the limits of printing his small-scale works in the previous decade.

Johns finally received copies of *Our Young Folks* by late June. In the 24 June 1867, *Autograph*, Johns continued to criticize the other periodical's "improbable fiction," but he did offer significant praise of its printedness: "The typography however is first rate. I could not wish for better long primer than is exhibited in 'Our Young Folks.'" Having reestablished reciprocity within his paper exchange, Johns claimed *Our Young Folks*'s typography as a model of good design for himself. He pivoted away from deploying his scribal practice's intermediality as a defensive spur to jumpstart his exchange with Ticknor and Fields. Instead, his praise of the typography was a gesture of good will that may have renewed bonds with his interlocutor. Such was the hope at any rate, for he requested a copy of the *Atlantic* in the same issue.

Conclusion

The importance of print's aesthetic dimensions, material registers, and exchange networks to James Johns's scribal practice and authority illustrates how the intermedial conditions of communication inflected a wide range of 19th-century social relations. Moreover, by elevating the status of scribal

34 Johns, *Autograph* (17 May 1867).

authorship within a predominantly print-based set of exchanges, Johns rejected supercessionist thinking about media. Thus, the making of Johns's *Autograph* marks the imagining of a future – or at least a newly present importance – to handwriting's meanings and affordances. His writing is an important contributor to and example of a shift that cultural historian Tamara Plakins Thornton has observed regarding Victorian-era handwriting in America, that "print...endowed handwriting with its own, new set of symbolic possibilities" such that "[h]andwriting thus became a level of meaning in itself."³⁵

More generally, Johns's handwritten newspaper illuminates how the social meanings of specific communicative forms and practices exist in relation to their larger media ecologies. Similarly, the fictional characters of Alcott's novel combined oral, handwritten, and printed forms of publication to work through constructions of gender and imagine future publics for women's writing. By sketching cartoons and repurposing printed matter, young men made class-inflected claims about the moral utility of writing and reading newspapers and then avoided those claims altogether; young women advocated for reforms in postal communication that might enable nationalist utopias of sentiment; and by lampooning the communicative practices of socially marginalized Americans through grotesque caricatures, one boy elaborated racist ideologies which invited the very forms of black counterpublicity that his newspaper denigrates. In all of these cases, scribes developed and questioned perceived social logics about handwriting, and about media more generally, by incorporating a wide range of communicative forms and technologies, including printed newspapers, presses, blank forms, and postal exchange, as well as various modes of oral performance. Ultimately, these scribes interwove the shifting elements of their media ecologies to make their newspapers, and in the making, they theorized the social politics of handwritten communication.

Sources

Archival sources

American Antiquarian Society. Worcester, Massachusetts (USA)

Allen-Johnson Family Papers

James Johns Papers

Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (USA)

Robert Walsh Papers

Whiteman Family Papers

Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois (USA)

³⁵ Thornton 1996, xiii.

Databases

Atwood, Roy Alden. *The Handwritten Newspapers Project*. Available from <http://handwrittennews.com>

Printed sources

- Alcott, Louisa May 1868–1869: *Little Women or, Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy*. Boston: Roberts Brothers.
- Dickens, Charles 1836–1837: *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*. London: Chapman and Hall.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel 1987: *Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Letters, 1853–1856*. In: *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, vol. 17. Edited by Woodson, Thomas, James A. Rubino, L. Neal Smith & Norman Holmes Pearson. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Literature

- Atwood, Roy Alden 1999: “Handwritten Newspapers”. In: Blanchard, Margaret A. (ed.), *History of the Mass Media in the United States. An Encyclopedia*. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 249–250.
- Berkey, James 2016: “‘Prisoner & Co.’s steam press of thought’. Handwritten Prison Newspapers of the Civil War”. Paper presented at The Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists’ fourth biennial conference held at Pennsylvania State University.
- Blum, Hester 2014: “The News at the Ends of the Earth. Polar Periodicals”. In: Luciano, Dana & Ivy Wilson (eds), *Unsettled States. Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies*. New York: New York University Press, 158–188.
- Brown, Matthew P. 2017: “Blanks. Data, Method, and the British American Print Shop”, *American Literary History* 29:2, 2017, 228–247.
- Citro, Joseph A. 1999: *Green Mountains, Dark Tales*. Hanover: University Press of New England.
- Cohen, Lara Langer 2013: “‘The Emancipation of Boyhood’. Postbellum Teenage Subculture and the Amateur Press”, *Common-Place* 14:1, 2013.
- Cohen, Lara Langer 2014: “Emily Dickinson’s Teenage Fanclub”, *Emily Dickinson Journal* 23:1, 2014, 32–45.
- Cohen, Lara Langer & Jordan Alexander Stein (eds) 2012: *Early African American Print Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Federal Writers’ Project 1937: *Vermont. A Guide to the Green Mountain State*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Isaac, Jessica 2012: “Youthful Enterprises. Amateur Newspapers and the Pre-History of Adolescence, 1867–1883”, *American Periodicals. A Journal of History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 22:2, 2012, 158–177.
- Jackson, Leon 2008: *The Business of Letters. Authorial Economies in Antebellum America*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Mattes, Mark 2018: “Media”, *Early American Studies. An Interdisciplinary Journal* 16:4, 2018, 708–713.
- Parker, Robert Dale 2007: “Introduction. The World and Writings of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft”. In: Parker, Robert Dale (ed.), *The Sound the Stars Make Rushing Through the Sky. The Writings of Jane Johnston Schoolcraft*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1–86.

- Piper, Andrew 2009: *Dreaming in Books. The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Radner, Joan Newlon 2010: “‘The Speaking Eye and the Listening Ear’. Orality, Literacy, and Manuscript Traditions in Northern New England Villages”. In: Gustafson, Sandra & Caroline Sloat (eds), *Cultural Narratives. Textuality and Performance in American Culture before 1900*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 175–199.
- Sánchez-Eppler, Karen 2008: “Practicing for Print. The Hale Children’s Manuscript Libraries”, *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 1:2, 2008, 188–209.
- Sánchez-Eppler, Karen 2018: “Records of Grief”. Paper presented at the University of Louisville. Abstract available from https://events.louisville.edu/event/karen_sanchez-eppler_records_of_grief#.XAGfTYtKgdU
- Shealy, Daniel 1992: “Louisa May Alcott’s Juvenilia. Blueprints for the Future”, *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* 17:4, 1992, 15–18.
- Showalter, Elaine 1997: “Introduction”. In: Showalter, Elaine (ed.), *Alternative Alcott*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, ix–xliii.
- Smith, Michael Ray 2011: *A Free Press in Freehand. The Spirit of American Blogging in the Handwritten Newspapers of John McLean Harrington, 1858–1869*. Grand Rapids: Edenridge Press.
- Stallybrass, Peter 2007: “‘Little Jobs’. Broadsides and the Printing Revolution”. In: Baron, Sabrina A., Eric N. Lindquist & Eleanor F. Shevlin (eds), *Agent of Change. Print Culture Studies after Elizabeth L. Eisenstein*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 315–341.
- Stallybrass, Peter 2008: “Printing and the Manuscript Revolution”. In: Zelizer, Barbie (ed.), *Explorations in Communication and History*. London: Routledge, 111–118.
- Stallybrass, Peter 2013: “Miræus Lecture. ‘Why Printing Precedes Manuscript’”. Paper presented at Flanders Heritage Library. Abstract available from <http://www.boekgeschiedenis.be/Peter%20Stallybrass>
- Thornton, Tamara Plakins 1996: *Handwriting in America. A Cultural History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Vail, Robert W. G. 1933: “James Johns. Vermont Pen Printer”, *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 27:2, 1933, 89–132.