

# H-Net Reviews

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**Andrew Pettegree.** *The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know about Itself.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014. 445 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-17908-8.

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The concept of news as we now know it evolved from conversations, letters, pamphlets, ballads, government proclamation, and other forms of communication from roughly 1400 to 1800 AD, Andrew Pettegree argues in *The Invention of News: How the World Came To Know About Itself*. This book contributes valuable insight to our understanding of media history.

Pettegree, a professor of modern history at the University of St. Andrews and the director of the St. Andrews Reformation Studies Institute, has written more than ten other books, primarily about the history of communications during the Renaissance and Reformation. In *The Invention of News*, he uses his impressive knowledge of history to paint a detailed picture of the evolution of news in Europe and North America.

Pettegree masterfully synthesizes a vast trove of secondary sources and some primary sources to thoroughly explore the transformation of news from the medieval period to the time of the American and French revolutions. While slightly dry at times, Pettegree's writing style is clear, and he organizes his information in a way that is easy to follow. A generous sprinkling of photographs, maps, prints, and other images throughout *The Invention of News* provides visual support for the points made in the text.

*The Invention of News* traces the start of the European news system to the creation of a postal system, first by the Romans, then by France and the Holy Roman Empire, and eventually by German emperors in the beginning of the sixteenth century. This development of an international postal system, Pettegree argues, was essential for

the expansion of news. In a few decades from the beginning of the seventeenth century, communication by post became quicker, cheaper, and more frequent. The network of places linked by the post became dense and more intricate. "For the provision of news this was a vital transformation," he writes (p. 167).

*The Invention of News* excels at explaining the different influences on the development of news, including governments, the church, universities, and especially businesses. As Pettegree notes, an effective communications system "had also to serve the needs of Europe's merchant traders" (p. 38), whose money encouraged the communication of more information. The book also points to three gradual changes in European society that helped to accelerate the development of news: a growing emphasis on the timeliness of information, an increase in the volume of news being circulated, and the shift in thinking "from an emphasis on divine to human agency in the explanation of events" (p. 369). In addition the book shows how warfare and epidemics curtailed the spread of news.

One of *The Invention of News*'s delights is its descriptions of the broad variety of content featured in early news accounts, from the proclamations of kings to the sightings of dragons. Pettegree writes: "News pamphlets are filled with disasters, weather catastrophes, heavenly apparitions, strange beasts, battles won, shocking crimes discovered and punished. In contrast, much of what was reported in the newspapers was necessarily routine and unresolved: ships arrive in port, dignitaries arrive in court, share prices rise and fall, generals are appointed

and relieved of command” (pp. 365-366).

Pettegree explores the different forms news took, such as travelogues, letters between friends, and diplomatic correspondence. *The Invention of News* shows how news was often shared through conversation and song in marketplaces and taverns. “In the Europe of the sixteenth century, however, singing played an important role in mediating news events to a largely illiterate public,” he states. “The news singers, sometimes blind and often accompanied by children, would sing out their wares, then offer printed versions for sales” (p. 121). With the coming of the Protestant Reformation, church sermons, he notes, became another important conduit for the expansion of news.

Pettegree establishes that misinformation and conflicting reports plagued the early European news markets: “The great events of history that pepper these pages were often initially mis-reported. In 1588 it was originally thought throughout much of continental Europe that the Spanish Armada had inflicted a crushing defeat on the English fleet; as in this case, the first definitive news was frequently outrun by rumour or wishful thinking, spreading panic or misjudged celebration. It was important to be first with the news, but only if it was true” (p. 3).

As with other sections of the book, it is difficult to read this passage without finding similarities with our current information ecosystem. Pettegree writes, “The news media of this era presented every bit as much a multi-media phenomenon as our own” (p. 372). He demonstrates, however, that despite shortcomings in the

information provided, the spread of news corresponded with “a vast widening of horizons for Europe’s citizens” that shaped the world we know today (p. 13).

*The Invention of News* ends with the coming of age of newspapers at the end of the eighteenth century. Along the way, Pettegree analyzes why newspapers did not grow more rapidly. He concludes, “the periodical press was attempting to make its way in a complex communications environment, where news was already disseminated relatively effectively in a large variety of ways, by word of mouth, letter, non-serial print, proclamations, pamphlets and so on” (p. 364).

*The Invention of News* would make an excellent primary or secondary reading for courses in media history, particularly those with a focus on Europe and North America. It also could serve as a text for more generalized history courses on Europe since the Middle Ages and colonial America.

The book’s one essential flaw is its Eurocentrism. From reading *The Invention of News*, one would never know that ways of communicating news existed outside of Europe and colonial North America. The publishers of the *tipao* (imperial gazettes) during the Han Dynasty in China, Incan messengers, and the highly skilled storytellers in precolonial Africa would have been surprised to learn that they were not really sharing news. A more apt title for Pettegree’s book would be *The Invention of European News*. Otherwise, it reinforces the dangerous notion that Europeans were the only ones capable of sharing news with value. Despite this flawed title, Pettegree has written a highly valuable book.

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