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The Commercial Advertiser in America's New Journalism around 1900

Journalistic entrepreneurial spirit between the press' commercialization and its role in society

Abstract: ***The Commercial Advertiser*** **between 1897 and 1901 is considered a journalistic experiment in New Journalism. Under chief local editor Lincoln Steffens, the idea was to produce a local paper that was able to meet the need for information and entertainment among the educated middle classes and a new generation of immigrants through stylistic quality and unusual forms of address. This study attempts to reconstruct the situational contexts behind the project and examines the entrepreneurial spirit in the editorial office of the *Commercial Advertiser* in relation to a commercial media logic of New Journalism and its established routines of research and presentation. In this context, there is a discussion to be had about how the reinterpretation of professional conventions, the dismantling of editorial hierarchies and routines, and the integration of marginalized actors as journalistic perspectives in reporting can affect the success and quality of innovative journalistic projects.**[1]

It was at the turn of the Twentieth Century that the popular mass press had the greatest impact. Habbo Knoch and Daniel Morat (Knoch/Morat 2003: 20) speak of this period as the »saddle period of the mass media.« In New York, for example, there were more than 50 daily newspapers fighting for the audience's favor (cf. Smythe 2002). One of these publications was the *Commercial Advertiser* – then the oldest daily newspaper in New York (Emery/Emery 1996: 65). Unlike some

1 Some passages of this paper are taken from the author's doctoral dissertation. The full work was published by edition lumiére under the title »Die Sozialreportage als Genre der Massenpresse. Erzählen im Journalismus und die Vermittlung städtischer Armut in Deutschland und den USA, 1880-1910«.

of the flagships of New Journalism (Emery/Emery 1996: 192ff), such as Joseph Pulitzer's *World* or William Randolph Hearst's *Journal*, the paper covered more of a niche of the press market, printing just a few thousand copies each day.

Yet the *Commercial Advertiser* was in no way in danger of slipping into journalistic insignificance, in fact, the newspaper retains an almost legendary reputation in American journalism history to this day. John Hartsock (Hartsock 2000: 21) argues that the *Commercial Advertiser* emanated »a critical consciousness.« Peter Parisi (Parisi 1992: 104) accredits the newspaper with having the ability to overcome »stereotypical journalistic categories,« while Joseph Campbell (Campbell 2006: 99) pays tribute to it as »an eccentric if stimulating experiment.« These assessments are irrevocably linked with the name Lincoln Steffens, who is particularly famous for his achievements as a muckraker (cf. Miraldi 2000), but was also the chief local editor of the paper for almost four years, from 1897 to 1901.

Steffens oversaw the development of one of the most unusual editorial offices in New York journalism, whose experimental style and way of working were a source of irritation for the city's larger newspapers. The *Commercial Advertiser's* local reporting in particular broke with journalistic practices that had originally been established at Charles Dana's *Sun* and ultimately perfected at Joseph Pulitzer's *World*. According to Michael Schudson (Schudson 1978: 83), Steffen's entrepreneurial spirit was spurred on by »a love of New York,« which spilled over into his newspaper work to some extent and motivated his journalistic experiment.

Now, a historical analysis that provides context aims to disprove this myth of journalism history, at least in part. It can be shown that the particular features of the *Commercial Advertiser* around the turn of the century were not only the result of the headstrong motives and interests of a journalistic personality, but that the entrepreneurial spirit of the newspaper can largely be reconstructed in relation to the commercial »organizational purpose« (Saxer 1999: 117) of New Journalism and thus must be seen in light of institutional structures and the constraints of the media system.

In order to demonstrate this hypothesis, the first step is to develop a theoretical basis that provides structure for the source work and builds on interpretation of the findings. This preliminary work allows the dominance of creative forms of presentation and of innovative journalistic processes in the editorial office of the *Commercial Advertiser* between 1897 and 1901 to be established systematically in a concrete context of origin. Ultimately, in examining the historical case, it is also possible to discuss how reinterpreting professional conventions, breaking through hierarchies and routines in editorial offices, and integrating marginalized actors can impact the success and quality of innovative journalistic projects as a journalistic perspective in reporting.

Theoretical foundation

The chosen theoretical basis is Thomas Luckmann's theory of communicative categories (2007), which has already been picked up by communication science as part of the constructivist theory of media categories. Media categories and genres (for differentiation, see Lünenborg 2017) lie »at the intersection between production, product, and reception, i.e. at the point at which processes of product design and production, properties of a designed product, and processes of attention towards such products, their perception and intellectual processing meet« (Hasebrink 2004: 75).

The theoretical framework presented here argues that the *Commercial Advertiser* must be considered as part of a specific media category, namely the popular mass press. This is not only marked by an *internal structure* that can be determined formally and thematically, i.e. with its own topics and a specific aesthetic, but is significantly reshaped by the condition of the respective media environment. The environment forms the *external structure* of media categories, »the level on which the socio-structural features of society have an impact on the communicative categories« (Ayaß 2010: 280f).

The external structure thus constitutes an analytical macro-level and concludes phenomena that can be considered media logic in terms of an overall concept. Based on the work of David Altheide and Robert Snow (1979), a media logic can be considered as a fundamental way of operating in journalism. This can be understood as an overlap of diverse (not only economically determined) actor-structure dynamics within a media system, which reshapes the interpretation, expectation, and constellation structures of all media actors (cf. Neuberger 2016).

When working with historical case studies, media category theory thus acts as a bridging concept and enables additions to the findings of research into the history of journalism that is based on macroanalytics and system theory (cf. Birkner 2012; Blöbaum 1994).

Source work

Attempts were made to achieve the greatest possible diversity of sources for the reconstructive historical analysis. This was done by analyzing different categories of sources. As well as analyzing ego-sources and biographical work by the editorial office staff of the time, in particular Lincoln Steffens, Hutchins Hapgood, Neith Boye, and Abraham Cahan, and contemporary practice literature from industry journals, working with press sources also played a central role in the context analysis. Not only was a random search conducted for source mate-

rial – available secondary references were also consulted for orientation and formed the starting point for further research (cf. Connery 1992a; Rischin 1985).

The *Commercial Advertiser* as a product of New Journalism

New Journalism developed within an area of journalistic conflict that played a major role in shaping the external and internal structure of the media category – as is clearly demonstrated by a look at the constellation and expectation structures of the profession, which is shaped by economic constraints and changing social demands. In addition, the period saw the emergence of new structures of interpretation, expressed in alternative patterns of attention and presentation. Below, this paper examines the extent to which, as a product between commercialization and creativity, the *Commercial Advertiser* was a result of this changed actor-structure dynamic and how this environment influenced both the newspaper's unusual editorial work and its experimental forms of presentation.

The commercial media logic of the American press around 1900

Sounding out more efficient production and sales mechanisms and testing more effective communication services are both typical of New Journalism. Both increased its audience exponentially and allowed it to achieve higher profit margins (cf. Baldasty 1992). In order to ensure the »varied constant production« (Saxer 1999: 118) of the popular mass newspapers in urban centers, the new newspaper projects led by Pulitzer's *World* were characterized by an optimized cooperative business model and greater willingness to take journalistic risks. Ted Curtis Smythe (Smythe 2003: 9f) recognized »a fundamental shift in business practices that paid for enterprising journalism.« This was in line with the conventional media logic that loss-making newspapers were purchased by investors at low prices before being completely redesigned. Often, the only thing that remained was the newspaper's title, which had a certain value as a brand name, allowing the product to remain recognizable and retaining the core of regular readers. For Alan Trachtenberg (Trachtenberg 2007: 82), the benefits of the business model are clear: »the advantages of incorporation were manifold, for it permitted a number of people to pool their capital and their efforts under one name, as a single entity.« Another possible reason behind this practice, however, was the fact that growth in the newspaper market had begun to slow by the early 1890s. As Randall Sumpter's analysis of census data shows, a certain level of market saturation had been reached (Sumpter 2013: 50).

These changed constellation structures had an impact on Lincoln Steffen's project with the *Commercial Advertiser*. The paper was a speculation object par

excellence. Various actors, including the former *World* chief editor John Cockerill, had invested in it over the years, trying to breathe new life into the paper, profit from its rich tradition, and turn it into a profitable journalistic undertaking. Despite its low circulation of just under 2,500 copies (Steffens 1931: 311; Lipsky 2013: 72), the renowned publication still generated income from advertising (Rischin 1952: 12). In addition, the *Commercial Advertiser* was valued for its conservative editorial policy and received financial support from railway magnate Collis Huntington, who had taken on the newspaper »for its influence, the resultant prestige accruing to the family name, and as a hobby« (Lipsky 2013: 72).

The Commercial Advertiser *as an investment project*

It is plausible that Steffens, who had worked in New York journalism since the mid-1880s, could have internalized a commercial media logic. This is evidenced by his detailed assessment of the business structures in American journalism, which appeared as a long article in *Scribner's Magazine* in October 1897 (cf. Steffens 1897). On the one hand, it expresses his appreciation of the possibilities of modern journalistic corporate management; on the other, the article clearly demonstrates how Steffens assessed the success of this own investments. It looks as though Steffens tried not only to imitate the tried-and-tested newspaper principle, but, at least in his estimation, to improve it.

It would probably be going too far to say that the former reporter invested in the *Commercial Advertiser* purely for economic reasons, although it cannot be denied that there was a capitalistic logic to his actions. Steffens himself freely admits it in letters to his father (Winter/Hicks 1974: 126, 130). After all, thanks to money left to him by a former classmate in Germany (Steffens 1931: 302-310), Steffens had a certain financial independence that allowed him to enter the market and shape a newspaper editorial office largely as he wished.

The newspaper concept expressed with the *Commercial Advertiser* under Lincoln Steffens' editorship thus reflected a larger-scale trend in the American press: that the value of a newspaper could be determined not only as a cultural asset, but much more as a marketable consumer good whose price could be calculated based on supply and demand. The following passage from the *Scribner's* article, which paints a very pragmatic picture of the needs of a journalistic audience, makes this concept of a newspaper more tangible:

> »When a man opens his paper on his way down-town after breakfast, or on his way home after a day's work, he wants a surprise - shocks, laughter, tears. If it were something to think about that he wanted, the best commodity to offer for sale might be editorials, essays, and important facts. But the commercial journalist, after studying and testing his market, is

> convinced that his customers prefer something to talk about. There are some who do not, but they are quickly disposed of« (Steffens 1897: 458).

The idea was to design informative services while also serving the very basal need for entertainment – offering something to talk about. These expectation structures formed the foundation for redesigning the *Commercial Advertiser*, at least ideally, as a high-quality tabloid newspaper whose content would appeal to the largest possible audience.

Market saturation and the economization of the profession

Investing in newspapers that had been run into the ground could generate enormous income, but of course also came with significant costs (Baldasty 1992: 85). Publishers and editors who invested in projects like this thus tried to keep staffing costs as low as possible (Smythe 1980: 3). Like other industrial segments, journalism saw the rise of a new class of wage workers (Solomon 1995: 118). They were judged even by their contemporaries: »The newspaper-worker is simply a wage-earner, a hired man« (Keller 1893: 694).

Yet it is clear that, despite this, newspapers like Pulitzer's *World* still needed an extensive staff in order to create the desired content. Industry journals of the time estimated that, remarkably, up to 100,000 people were looking for a career in journalism in the late 1880s (Sumpter 2013: 45). The high number of applicants for positions allowed newspaper owners to replace staff almost at will (Wright 1898: 614) – a practice that had a particular impact on older reporters (Keller 1893: 693f.). From the owners' point of view, staff fluctuation was useful for two reasons: Those new to the profession were paid less and willing to take on more. The pressure of competition shaped the constellation structures of the popular mass press. It was therefore an integral part of the professional culture in New Journalism »to exhibit ›enterprise‹ – that is, [to] be aggressively resourceful in getting interesting stories« (Dicken-Garcia 1989: 198).

The Commercial Advertiser *as a career springboard*

As indicated above, more and more men (and a few women) were aspiring to a career in journalism in the big cities. That meant that journalism became significantly younger over the course of the 1890s. Perhaps this was one of the reasons behind the high innovation potential and certain willingness to experiment seen at newspapers like the *Commercial Advertiser* at the time. As at many other newspapers, those responsible at the paper profited from the changed conditions guarding entry to the field of journalism. While other editorial offices tended to be skeptical of young graduates entering the profession (Fedler 2000: 18f.), however,

the editorial office at the *Commercial Advertiser* made a conscious decision in favor of those with an academic education (Steffens 1931: 315ff.).

It would not be entirely accurate, however, to say that Steffens' editorial office was staffed largely by Ivy League graduates with no professional experience of journalism. Comprising 20 people, the editorial office staff also included practiced journalists like Henry J. Wright and J. S. Seymour (Kaplan 1974: 83). Wright had worked with Steffens as a local deskman at the *Evening Post* and had joined with him to invest in the *Commercial Advertiser*; Seymour had already worked as a deskman »on the wreck,« as Steffens (Steffens 1931: 311) called the newspaper before it was taken over. Their role was predominantly to shore up the paper's foundation from a business point of view (Steffens 1931: 338). His adherence to experienced deskmen is clear evidence of Steffens' belief that editorial competence and journalistic orientation were essential in order to make a newspaper with largely inexperienced staff.

At the same time, this pattern of recruitment was also based on the expectation structures that had formed among journalistic actors and the public. Larzer Ziff (Ziff 1967: 146-165) described the attraction of the journalism profession for young men of the post-Civil War generation extensively as a kind of »school in the cemetery.« What he means is that journalism in large cities made it possible to start a literary career, even if the profession ultimately turned out to be a dead end for many. As a leading editor, Steffens was able to exploit this attraction to entice talented authors to join his paper. Hutchins Hapgood, Carl Hovey, Guy Scull, and Robert Dunn came straight from literature seminars at Harvard to Steffens' editorial office (Steffens 1931: 316). These young men were employed in the editorial office on a trial basis over the summer, when the staff reporters were on vacation. If they managed to prove themselves, they were offered a permanent position in the fall. The stated intention of this method was to bring non-journalistic skills and expertise into the editorial office staff (Steffens 1931: 311-315). In addition, as many of these university graduates employed by Steffens had no professional experience of journalism, they were also useful cheap labor for the local deskman, who paid them a weekly wage of just $12 to $15 (Steffens 1931: 317). The focus was thus not only on a creative newspaper project, but also on return on investment – corresponding in the broadest sense to the constellation structures of the commercial mass press discussed above.

Specifications and freedoms in editorial work

These structures in editorial offices, however, are also proof of a strategy to roll back strict working routines in favor of greater freedom for individuals to make decisions. Instead of forcing staff into a corset of rules and behaviors, attempts were made to diversify points of view and methods of working. The heterogene-

ous composition of the editorial office and the promotion of younger staff led to editorial rules being reduced to a minimum. In his autobiography, Steffens emphasizes:

> »There was to be no *Commercial Advertiser* style, no *Commercial Advertiser* men. So also there were no rules about promptitude, sobriety, accuracy; no lists of friends or enemies of the paper; no editorial policy; no ›beats;‹ and best of all, there was no insistence even upon these rules, which were broken at any one's convenience« (Steffens 1931: 315).

This admittedly produced different opportunities for action in the (local) editorial office of the *Commercial Advertiser* than probably in any other New York newspaper: »We all had a freer hand in our work than men on the other papers,« highlights Hutchins Hapgood (Hapgood 1972: 141) in his memoirs.

Another autobiographical anecdote illustrates the personnel management of the editorial office leadership:

> »One day [Steffens] came in with a story just turned in by a member of the staff and said, ›Look at this! He writes a story and in the middle of it he buries an item of real news! He doesn't know news from a hole in the ground, calls himself a reporter! Fix that up.‹ He went away chuckling with enjoyment« (Boyce/DeBoer-Langworthy 2003: 166).

Editorial specifications were thus sometimes asserted in an adapted form in order to fit the reporters' abilities and the audience's expectations. Steffens' energetic, jovial way of dealing with his staff can certainly be interpreted as a deliberate strategy to ensure a pleasant working environment in the editorial office. After all, it was a way for him to keep his staff happy even though they could not expect a large salary. The jobs were thus completed depending on the sparse means of the editorial office: The office itself was only well-lit in places, and there was a shortage of basic material resources such as furniture and typewriters (Boyce/DeBoer-Langworthy 2003: 151). The lack of resources also goes some way to explaining why, unlike other newspapers, the *Commercial Advertiser* chose not to use particularly prominent headlines or extensive leads. That saved funds in both processing and printing. All in all, the presentation was extremely sober, using almost no illustrations at all. In contrast, random samples from 1894 show that there had been an established layout before Steffens' takeover, corresponding to the style of other New York newspapers like *The World*. Under Steffens, cost-intensive typographic aspects were reduced, to be replaced by local reporting with a more creative style.

Research practices

The editorial structures and Steffens' guidance of the staff as local deskmen allowed the young journalists to implement alternative research practices. Routines were not developed in the editorial office of the *Commercial Advertiser* to the extent that they were in other local editorial offices. The newspaper's reporters were not forcibly parked at the police station at Mulberry Bend, for example, to wait for stories, nor did newer information media such as the telephone appear to play a significant role in research. Steffens writes, »Young writers were expected to beat the other papers only in the way they presented the news« (Steffens 1931: 317).

Compared to products published by large companies, such as the »True Stories of the News«[2] in *The World* (Michael 2017) or Jacob Riis' extensive magazine reportage »How the Other Half Lives« (1889), the articles in the *Commercial Advertiser* testify to different journalistic approaches when it comes to ways to gain information, especially in terms of techniques like observation and questioning. Particularly striking is the lack of secondary research, such as the incorporation of statistical material or the use of statements from the police and other authorities. While experienced reporters often supplemented their material with such sources, or even built whole articles around them, such proximity to institutional sources is almost entirely lacking from the *Commercial Advertiser* articles examined here. Instead, the reportage-style local articles are characterized by a high level of immersion, which demanded more time-intensive (and unbiased) on-site research and finer techniques of participative observation.

The cultivation of these research methods is made possible by the editorial environment: Steffens asked his staff to reduce common journalistic strategies for collecting information, such as by frequenting common news environments at court, in hospitals etc. and instead to use the cultural technique of ›strolling,‹ which was much more strongly embedded in the European press. However, in contrast to how a stroller would work (cf. Neumeyer 1999), frequent temporal determinations in these texts also bear witness to the fact that the established topicality criteria of the daily mass press were more relevant to journalistic work at the *Commercial Advertiser* and with regard to the expectations of its audience. There was a latent compulsion to produce topical stories. Yet the deskmen responsible in the local editorial office also considered it legitimate for a member of staff to spend extended periods standing at a crossroads and making notes on what was happening in the hope that they brought forward a story, or to sit in cafés on the Lower East Side and document the conversations that took place (Parisi 1992: 102ff.; Connery 1992b: 122f.).

2 A Shatchen's work. In: *The World* dated 05.12.1890, p. 9; The Witch Doctress of Baxter Street. In: *The World* dated 11.12.1890, p. 9.

These techniques, however, were not developed and trialed exclusively in the editorial environment of the *Commercial Advertiser* as a principle of authentic journalistic storytelling. Around 1900, such immersive practices in local journalism in large cities also brought forward extensive innovations elsewhere in the USA. Focusing topics on criminal and social reporting and immersing oneself in the world of workers and immigrants in large cities thus provided fertile ground for empirical social sciences and urban sociology in particular to develop as a scientific discipline. The Chicago School of Sociology led by Robert E. Park, who learned his trade as a local reporter, is proof of this (cf. Lindner 1990, 2004; Haas 1999).

Topics and forms of presentation in New Journalism

The media environment in the USA not only shaped the organization forms of the media category, but also brought forth new journalistic forms of address. Interpretation structures developed, within which the understanding of what should find space in the newspaper as news content was expanded. Human interest stories in particular combined an educational and socialization function of the press with entertainment value, making it also possible to read articles as »social parables« (Kerrane 1997: 17). The growing relevance of genres like reportage clearly demonstrates that journalistic patterns of attention and selection criteria were changing due to social conditions, thus attempting to both meet an urban audience's need for information and reflect their emotional world. Local news in particular became a symbol of a cultural character and an expression of the growing uncertainty and social fissuring of American society just before the turn of the 20th Century.

The concept of a modern newspaper requires the ability not only to appeal to a bourgeois American audience, but equally to attract the various immigrant nationalities as readers. Campbell (Campbell 2001: 60ff.) has shown that one of the features of New Journalism was its formation of a readership that crossed the boundaries between classes and social backgrounds. After all, in order to find their feet in New York and learn the language, immigrants first used the easily consumable content of the mass press in large cities. Yet publications in foreign language were also successful as journalistic services. The market for Yiddish newspapers in particular boomed (Rischin 1978: 122ff.). It is therefore little wonder that the mass press in New York also turned its attention to the life of the Jewish population in its reporting, as multiple reportages in the *World* series »True Stories of the News«[3] and the reportages by Jacob Riis (cf. Yochel-

3 Commercial Advertiser Stock. In: *New York Times* dated 30.05.1886; Newspaper politics. In: *Newark Sunday Call* dated 07.08.1892, p. 16.

son/Czitrom 2007) show. While articles like this often remained reactionary in their presentation and thus tended to reflect the unease of a bourgeois audience, the *Commercial Advertiser* under Steffens also attempted to question such points of view. This orientation is clear to see in the period investigated. On the one hand, the content was very conventional and – in contrast to Steffens' claim (Steffens 1931: 339) – oriented on current events and the topic agenda of other press organs.[4] On the other, it also offered quirky, stylistically unusual reports with a strong local flavor by young reporters like Hutchins Hapgood, or journalists of unusual sociality like Abraham Cahan, a Jew who had immigrated from Eastern Europe.

Alternative strategies of thematization and presentation in the Commercial Advertiser

The experiment was to be a success for both Steffens and his young reporters. After all, the staff at the *Commercial Advertiser* allowed the exploration of unconventional ways of accessing themes, not stunted by years of police reporting and pack journalism, for example (Hapgood 1972: 138). They succeeded in experimenting with a writing style based on a realistic narrative technique. Abraham Cahan played a key role in the constellation of experienced and inexperienced employees. Thanks to his biography as a Jewish immigrant, with professional experience as a journalist in the Yiddish press and as an aspiring author (Lipsky 2013), Cahan was essential to the project of a newspaper whose unique selling points were »personal styles« and local color (Kaplan 1974: 83f.). »He brought the spirit of the East Side into our shop,« writes Steffens (Steffens 1931: 317) of Cahan's key position in the editorial office.

Cahan's help allowed the paper to appeal both to bourgeois readers with high literary standards and to (Jewish) immigrants, both of whom felt that the content reflected them (Rischin 1953: 24ff.). With his design of the newspaper, Steffens thus succeeded in developing a unique selling point for the newspaper compared to the established New Journalism. Almost every issue in the period examined contains articles that take an unusual look at the lives of immigrants.[5]

4 One example of this is the reporting on the Spanish-American War, which dominated coverage for example on June 8, 1898; all articles on »Page 9« – otherwise reserved for local news – on May 28, 1898 were also based on this key event, including: America's Mulvaney. In: *The Commercial Advertiser* dated 28.05.1898, p. 9; Madrid in war time. In: *The Commercial Advertiser* dated 28.05.1898, p. 9; Spanish War talk. In: *The Commercial Advertiser* dated 28.05.1898, p. 9

5 In a jewish school. In: *The Commercial Advertiser* dated 30.10.1897; Women's tailors on the East Side. In: *The Commercial Advertiser* dated 11.12.1897; Paying the rent. In: *The Commercial Advertiser* dated 18.12.1897, p. 11; East Side small shops. In: *The Commercial Advertiser* dated 31.12.1897; Boyce, Neith: Beau, Major Sah. In: *The Commercial Advertiser* dated 15.01.1898, S. 9; Shofar blows tomorrow. In: *The Commercial Advertiser* dated 04.09.1899, p. 2; Hark, the shofar. In: *The Commercial Advertiser* dated 17.09.1898,p. 8; B. J.: Diogenes up to date. In: *The Commercial Advertiser* dated 28.10.1899, p. 11; Venus in Grand Street. In: *The Commercial Advertiser* dated 28.10.1899, p. 11; The boys in the ghetto. In: *The Commercial Advertiser* dated 04.11.1899, p. 9.

When it comes to the settings that the local articles capture, it is noticeable that reporters frequently attended the synagogues of the Lower East Side. The newspaper based its reporting on the holidays of the Jewish calendar, thus taking into account the importance of these events for its audience.

The editorial office also tried to provide content targeted at readers from the working classes on the Lower East Side, whose confrontational style may also have been of interest to a middle and upper class audience in the suburbs. There is increased reporting on the labor disputes of the immigrants, in particular in the textiles industry.[6] However, the way the labor dispute was interpreted differed from the depiction in other newspapers, with the articles frequently giving space to the interests of industrial workers (Rischin 1985: 369-389). Unsurprisingly, reporting in the *Commercial Advertiser* was thus also shaped by coverage of the political and cultural possibilities of socialism. The articles looked at the ideological conflict that became apparent in the cultural life of New York as Eastern European immigrants brought this philosophy into the United States.

All this was based on a news concept that was able to create the greatest possible social proximity between journalists and their audience in a different way: »to get the news so completely and to report it so humanly that the reader will see himself in the other fellow's place« (Steffens 1931: 317). An anecdote about Steffens asking the reporter Cahan to report on a gruesome murder provides an example of this way of handling topics.

> »Here, Cahan, is a report that a man has murdered his wife, a rather bloody, hacked-up crime. We don't care about that. But there's a story in it. That man loved that woman well enough once to marry her, and now he has hated her enough to cut her all to pieces. If you can find out just what happened between that wedding and this murder, you will have a novel for yourself and a short story for me. Go on now, take your time, and get this tragedy as a tragedy« (Steffens 1931: 317).

What this passage clearly demonstrates is that, although the editorial office of course did not ignore such a key topic of local reporting, Steffens' instruction to conduct background research – rather than simply recreating the course of events in the crime itself – gives insight into the processing routines that were so atypical of this topic and that strengthened literary social reportage as part of both editorial and reportorial work at the *Commercial Advertiser* (Hapgood 1972: 139).

One feature of this presentation strategy in the *Commercial Advertiser* is the immersive research into social backgrounds, which painted human portraits

6 Strikers victorious. In: *The Commercial Advertiser* dated 02.08.1898, p. 3; Serial strikers. In: *The Commercial Advertiser* dated 09.08.1898, p. 3; Gloomy strikers. In: *The Commercial Advertiser* dated 20.06.1899, p. 8.

of even delinquent subjects and thus succeeded in gaining the empathy of the audience. This alternative form of participation is ensured by the authentic presentation of life in poor and immigrant communities and meets the benchmark of »optimum authenticity« (Pöttker 2000: 44). The focus was not on the remote or foreign aspects of these people, but on descriptive features that created familiarity, such as the immigrants' clothing and their friendly, albeit exhausted, faces (Rischin 1985: 113-117, 118-120).

In contrast to other reporting patterns, this method thus succeeded in articulating people's diverse voices and illuminating phenomena of foreignness, such as immigration and poverty, from an unexpected, multilayered perspective. The pronounced figural characterization gives the action dialog-like quality, making the people concerned more tangible outside their distorted images in the media, and creating a sense of familiarity.

In the *Commercial Advertiser*, the behavior of the people on the Lower East Side is essentially separated from the conventional dramatization seen in New Journalism, in order to establish new structures of expectation and interpretation within the media category. The form of presentation also achieves this by attempting to communicate the locations of the action through apparently counter-factual details. The description of the settings in Cahan's reportage »Pillelu, Pillelu« is a good example of this.

> »To those who stood on the corner Hester Street and Ludlow last night the two intersecting marketplaces looked like a vast cross of flaring gold. [...] The sidewalks and the asphalt pavements were crowded with pushcarts, each with a torch dangling and flickering over it, and the hundreds of quivering flames stretched east and west, north and south, two restless bands of fire crossing each other in a blaze and losing themselves in a medley of fire, smoke, many-colored piles of fish and glimmering human faces« (Rischin 1985: 56).

Instead of sketching the streets as the scenery of misery, as »How the Other Half Lives« (cf. Riis 1889) does, for example, the article uses sometimes polyvalent imagery to allow a different view of areas often considered social trouble spots. The evening procession of the immigrants' torch-lit pushcarts at the corner of Hester Street and Ludlow Street – a place that tended to be populated with criminals, prostitutes, and beggars in articles in the urban mass press – is certainly not held up as a portent of the disintegration of society, but instead reframed positively as »a vast cross of flaring gold.« The description of the scene has a certain symbolism, allowing harmonious coexistence in poor communities to be highlighted, rather than focusing on social conflict there. Instead of threatening, alien creatures, the reporter sees only »glimmering human faces«.

Summary

In the contextualizing historical analysis, it was possible to discuss why the *Commercial Advertiser* plays such an important role in the history of journalism between 1897 and 1901. Systematic source work forms the basis for a more precise definition of this assessment. The case study shows what a strong influence an unusual editorial organization can have on the implementation of journalistic approaches and forms of presentation.

The circumstances of the newspaper experiment were first outlined with a view to macrofactors. On the one hand, the formation of a disperse urban audience led to the development of new structures of expectation, which influenced the journalistic work and encouraged creative forms of address. On the other, the fight for the audience's attention is emblematic of constellation structures that were based on a decidedly commercial media logic of New Journalism and showed itself in the tough competition within the professional field. In this media environment, the *Commercial Advertiser* was really a marginal product, albeit one that became an investment for business-oriented journalists due to certain features. It is proof of the entrepreneurial spirit at the saddle point of the modern press boom that the newspaper developed creative communication offers and designed them for a readership that covered the entire social spectrum of urban audiences. In order to attract and retain the loyalty of proletarian classes of readers or an audience with an immigrant background, the local editorial office in particular experimented with presentation strategies that differed from the constant production of the market leaders by deliberately aggravating expectations with regard to the relevance and topicality criteria of journalism. Given this market concentration and saturation in American journalism in the late 19th Century, it is remarkable that the investment in the ailing *Commercial Advertiser* was considered an economic success overall (Kaplan 1974: 95).

As a historical example, the *Commercial Advertiser* shows that phenomena that are now discussed as ›entrepreneurial journalism‹ have essentially always occurred within a precarious and turbulent media environment (cf. Cohen 2015). The newspaper was made by actors who promised themselves journalistic independence and a way out of the wage earner trap at other newspapers. This logic of action appears like the prototype of an »entrepreneurial journalist [...] who does not rely on traditional media organizations and who can chart her own path to success« (Cohen 2015: 517). Steffens and his colleagues succeeded in producing a local paper that realized its literary and journalistic ambitions with innovative forms of address and quality of style. The *Commercial Advertiser* thus balanced the »inbuilt schizophrenia« (Weischenberg 1994: 451) of journalism between market orientation and social responsibility and, at least in an ideal world, embodied a popular mass press that consolidates the capitalist entrepreneurial spirit with the societal task of the press.

With a tendency to provide context for anecdotal case descriptions of local events, the deskmen and reporters of the *Commercial Advertiser* succeeded in highlighting contradictions in conventional reporting in the mass press and challenging socially accepted interpretations of topics such as poverty and immigration. The opportunity to do this was provided by research methods that used immersion and more complex observation and questioning techniques than other newspapers. It was the style-defining prerequisites for the credible dialogs and rounded character profiles that made the *Commercial Advertiser's* local reporting so unique and met the standard of journalistic authenticity in another entirely unique way.

The historical example thus produces two further points of reference to the present. Firstly, producing innovative and high-quality local reporting appears to depend on journalistic actors' opportunities to establish alternative routines for collecting and processing information – which in turn relies on media organizations allowing them greater freedom to do so. Secondly, it can be beneficial from a journalistic point of view to generate greater social diversity in the editorial offices, as this encourages differing points of view on various topics and the articulation of marginalized voices. This can then have a positive impact on the attractiveness and informational content of the reporting (cf. Pöttker/Kiesewetter/Lofink 2016).

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