

Public Abstract

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There is relatively little scholarly discussion regarding journalism and publishing in New York City prior to the so-called “revolution of 1833” that witnessed the birth of the Penny Press. Consequently, an important stage in the symbiotic evolution of New York City and journalism has either been ignored or misinterpreted as part of the misguided notion that the early Republic represented a “dark age” of American media. Thus, this thesis reconstructs the community of printers, booksellers, and bookbinders that existed in New York City in the first decade of the nineteenth-century. A close analysis of city directories published between 1800 and 1810 reveals that working-class artisans and merchants associated with the printing trade deliberately settled in Manhattan’s Old East Ward by consciously choosing to open shops on certain streets as a result of their shared social and economic identities. This community, consisting of an area geographically bound by William Street and the East River docks, has been heretofore ignored by historians. This thesis asserts that the association of printers, booksellers, and bookbinders should be considered as a central category of analysis, and demonstrates that this community had a direct influence on early printing trade unionization, printing and publishing specialization, and political rivalries between newspaper editors such as James Cheetham, Peter Irving, and William Coleman. By utilizing sources such as directories, newspapers, pamphlets, speeches, journals, and letters, this thesis reinterprets the Habermasian public sphere as an actual public space—a community of like-minded artisans and merchants who shared common identities through their association with New York City’s printing trade, despite ideological barriers. Indeed, this thesis maintains that by looking at public discourse as part of an organic community—as opposed to a theoretical realm that exists only in conversation—a better understanding of print culture will emerge that will enrich the prevailing scholarly dialogue. Ultimately, this thesis presents the possibility of bridging a gap between the first years of the nineteenth-century and the journalism and publishing “revolution” that overwhelmed Manhattan in the mid-1830s, two epochs in journalism historiography that have been, up until this point, thought to be irreconcilable.