

The Role of Newspapers in Shaping Public Opinion During the Period of Mormon Arrival in Quincy, 1838–39

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The events of the Mormon arrival, settlement, troubles, and expulsion from Illinois are, of course, interesting for the historian, the sociologist, and the scholar of religious studies; but they are also of interest to the student of the mass media. For the last several decades, many scholars have focused on the mass media as agents of social influence, and the Mormon experience provides an excellent case for the study of the role of newspapers in influencing public opinion during the late 1830s and early 1840s.

The larger questions involved in this study have been favorite research problems for media scholars for many years: How much influence do the mass media have on public opinion? And what are the mechanisms by which that influence is translated into action? This area of study, what is generally referred to as *media effects*, has been much in the news lately with respect to the debates over the influence of television, movies, and popular music on the behavior of the young. It also speaks to the question of the media's role in political campaigns and policy debates.

At present, one of the dominant schools of thought in media effects is the theory known as *agenda-setting*. The basic principle of agenda-setting was summed up deftly by one of its earliest writers, Bernard Cohen, who wrote in 1863, “[The press] may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*.”¹ To paraphrase, agenda-setting theory holds that the true influence of the mass media is not in directly causing a particular action but

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rather in selecting, highlighting, and framing issues in terms that cause the public to regard a particular issue as important or unimportant, a particular course of action as wise or unwise, and a particular individual as beneficial or harmful to the public good.

Agenda-setting is related to an earlier theory of influence known as the *two-step flow model*, first developed in the 1940s by social scientists studying information flow among voters in upstate New York.² These researchers observed that most of the people in a community did not look to the mass media for information or influence but rather looked to individuals they knew and respected—the so-called *opinion leaders* of the community. The opinion leaders, on the other hand, were heavy users of the media; they took advantage of the knowledge and insights gained from the media to make decisions, which then influenced the decision making of the people around them.

Both of these explanatory models, agenda-setting and the two-step flow, will come in handy for us as we examine the role of newspapers in the nineteenth century. But before we make a direct application of these models, I will take a close look at the sequence of events of that era as they appeared in newspapers of the times.

Unfortunately, the archival records of Quincy's first newspaper—the *Illinois Bounty and Land Register*, founded in 1835 and renamed the Quincy *Argus* by the time of the era under current discussion—are spotty and largely missing for the years of the Mormon arrival; only four issues from 1838 survive, and none from 1839 survives. Much of what we know of the *Argus* comes through comments in its rival newspaper, the Quincy *Whig*, founded in 1838, for which better records are available. Luckily for the researcher, the editors of the *Argus* and *Whig*, like most frontier editors of the times, engaged in a lively and quite barbed rivalry. Few issues of the *Whig* are without some amount of snide commentary about the content of the previous week's *Argus*, so the subject matter of the *Argus* can often be inferred by reading the *Whig*.

In his comprehensive history of American journalism, Frank Luther Mott describes American newspapers of this time as moving from the era of the partisan press, when newspapers were heavily subsidized by political parties and expected to hew to the partisan mark in all their reporting of public events, into the evolution of the penny press, demarcated by the publication of the New York *Sun* by Benjamin Day in 1832, when newspapers began to rely on advertising for financial support and to detach themselves from their insistent party allegiances.³ This distinction works well enough for the newspapers of the large urban centers of the American East Coast, but as one examines the newspapers of the interior and the western frontier,

that demarcation grows less and less distinct. The newspapers of the frontier, circulated among much-smaller populations than the newspapers of the East, relied more heavily than the Eastern papers on printing jobs and legal notices for income; since many of these jobs were awarded by local government officials, party boosterism was the rule for these newspapers well into the penny-press era.

The two Quincy newspapers operating at this time were largely party newspapers. The *Whig* faithfully reprinted the speeches of Whig leaders at the state and national levels, reported election returns from around the country when they favored the Whig party, and engaged in a constant battle with the local Democratic party, which it referred to by using the derogatory term “loco-focos” rather than “Democrats.” Judging by remarks in the *Whig*, the *Argus* returned the partisanship with equal enthusiasm. Local events were viewed almost exclusively in light of their political ramifications. As William Huntzicker writes, this fixation on politics was common, and the ideas that newspapers should conduct their own reporting and should comprehensively cover local news had yet to take firm hold: “Some editors relied entirely on their exchanges and even apologized when the mail failed to bring enough news.” In the pre-telegraph age, Huntzicker observes that “word of mouth [often] spread news faster than the printed word.”⁴

With this historical background in mind, then, we can examine how the Quincy newspapers framed the issue of the Mormon troubles in Missouri and attempted to set the agenda for consideration of the Latter-day Saint upon their arrival in Illinois. The *Whig*’s first mention of the denomination’s operations in Missouri comes in August 1838, and it is both highly politicized and highly unfavorable. I quote here to give the tone:

Caldwell County, Mo. is filled up most entirely with Mormons. They were worse upon the Whigs of Missouri, than our canallers were upon us in this state.— Thus the vote stood at the late election. Van Buren ticket 351, Whig 2. Delusion as well as ignorance have helped the loco focos over the river. Jo Smith, the high priest of the Mormons, deserves an office at the hands of the party—he would make an excellent Sub-Treasurer.⁵

Two weeks later, the *Whig* sounds another note of alarm about the activities in western Missouri. Again, the tone is alarmist and prejudiced. The newspaper states that Mormons “are parading through [Davies] County, threatening the lives of all known to be opposed to them, and compelling the people to sign some kind of a paper, the purport of which is not known.” The *Whig* goes on to cite a Missouri newspaper’s report: “The Western Star, published at Liberty, remarks that the Mormons do indeed present a formidable front. They can muster from 1000 to 1500 fighting men; and of that

degraded and ignorant class, who implicitly obey the will of their leaders.”⁶

Such are the terms with which the *Whig* viewed the group that was so soon to arrive on the west bank of the Mississippi: thuggish, militaristic, blindly obedient, and—worst of all—Democrats. The other issues of September and October, however, contain accounts that are not particularly inflammatory and

The Mormons.—“A few days since I witnessed the emigration of 95 families, consisting of near 600 souls, gathered from different parts, going to the extreme west of Missouri. They call themselves “**Letter Day Saints,**” commonly called **Mormons.** This latter name they do not acknowledge, but say it is only a “**nick name.**” They travel in wagons, and

Quincy Whig
22 September 1838

that make an effort to be evenhanded in their description of the troubles, although Joseph Smith is at one point described as an “incubus.” In late September, the *Whig* reprinted an article from the Philadelphia

Focus in which the writer interviewed a Mormon family about to leave for Missouri—an article that was entirely neutral and calm in tone, something like a “human-interest” feature of the present day.⁷ In early October, the *Whig* reported that “the difficulties have, in a great measure, ceased.”⁸

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The Mormons have surrendered to the Missouri authorities. The leaders are to be tried for treason. In one settlement in Caldwell county, a company of Missourians, fell upon a company of 34 Mormons, and massacred all but four.

Quincy Whig
6 October 1838

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In November 1838, the reports from Missouri were entirely different, and the *Whig’s* coverage of the

events changed from week to week. On 10 November, in a two-column front-page report entitled “Mormon disturbances,” the newspaper excitedly reports on the fighting, almost exclusively using accounts provided by the Missouri authorities. Reprinting a letter from one of the Missouri militia commanders, the *Whig* prints that “Mormons had devastated Daviess County, burning the county seat, and most of the houses in the county and were then marching to Richmond to burn and destroy it” before the citizens of Missouri stopped their reign of terror. The picture here is consonant with the late summer accounts cited earlier.

But one week later, the *Whig*, to its credit, repudiates those initial news

reports. While not portraying the Mormons as entirely guiltless in the conflict, the newspaper does acknowledge provocations by the non-Mormon population of the area. It also scornfully reports the extermination order issued by Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs and says that up to forty Mormons were massacred in a single incident. And, for the first time, the newspaper raises the question of the fate of those Mormons who were being driven from the state. In a rather worried tone, the newspaper asks, "Are these 5000 people—without any means, and literally beggars to be thrust upon the charities of Illinois, Iowa, or Wisconsin?"⁹

THE MORMON WAR ENDED!
The Mormon war has been terminated, by a surrender of the Mormon leaders to the troops under Gen. ARCHINSON. This happened on SUNDAY, Oct. 28th. On that day, about three thousand men, being part of the army of 5000, ordered out under Gen. CLARK, comprising Gen. Archinson's division made their appearance before the town of FAR WEST, the county

Quincy Whig
17 November 1838

For the rest of 1838, the *Whig* continues its mixed tone toward the Mormons. On the one hand, the 22 December issue of the newspaper reports, "The distresses of these people, without home or shelter of any kind, is said to be truly heart-rending"; but, on the other hand, the 8 December issue reprints a letter to the editor of the *Missouri Republican* that defends the Missourians' actions, blames the Danites for starting

The celebrated Mormon preacher and leader, SIDNEY RIGDON, arrived in Quincy, on Saturday last. To show the influence of mob rule in Missouri, the sheriff was obliged to take him from prison, (after he had given bail), under cover of the night, lest the mob would get hold of him, who had sworn to take his life.—

Quincy Whig
23 Feb 1839

the conflict, and expresses virulent anti-Mormon sentiment throughout.¹⁰ In fact, the same 22 December article that describes the distresses of the displaced settlers also scoffs at reports that a Missouri author is working on a history of the Mormons: "We should not suppose the public felt much interest in a work of the kind—they have heard enough of the subject of late."

The *Whig* appears to have taken its own advice at this point. For a remarkable stretch of six consecutive issues, during which time one may

assume that larger and larger numbers of Mormons were arriving in the vicinity of Quincy, the newspaper makes no mention whatsoever of the group. Then, in late February 1838, the *Whig* came out with a page 1 article that was its most wholeheartedly favorable to date. Calling the Mormons an “oppressed people” and Illinois “an asylum” for them, the *Whig* writes, “They appear, as far as we have seen, to be a mild, inoffensive people, who could not have given a cause for persecution they have met with.” The *Whig* also notes other favorable press coverage: “[W]e are pleased to see such independent and influential papers as the Missouri Republican . . . St. Louis Gazette, and others standing up boldly in defence of the violated rights of the Mormons.” In addition, the newspaper reprinted an article from the *Springfield Journal* highly critical of the Missouri authorities.¹¹ No mention is made of coverage in the *Quincy Argus*, though not too much should be made of this absence; the *Whig* typically mentioned only material in the *Argus* that it disagreed with, so the lack of comment may simply mean that no quarrel could be found with articles in the *Argus*.

The *Argus* came in for plenty of criticism in the March issues of the *Whig*, however, as politics once again rose to the forefront of thinking and humanitarianism returned to the background. In the 2 March issue of the *Whig*, the newspaper reports indignantly that “a little knot of politicians, designated the ‘Quincy Democratic Association,’ have been tampering with the Mormons now among us, for purposes which the reader can well imagine.” The article says that the Democratic Association had a “secret caucus” on the previous Saturday night (that is, 23 February) and offered help to the Mormons on the condition that all help should come through the association. Reporting that the Mormon leaders demurred from such an arrangement, the *Whig* adds that the Democratic Association appointed a committee to meet further with the Church leaders on the previous Wednesday night. Among the members of the committee was the editor of the *Argus*, I. N. Norris.¹²

The next issue, 9 March, is largely taken up with legal notices, with only a passing mention of the Mormon situation. So it is not until 16 March, two and a half weeks after the committee meeting, that the *Whig* gives a description of what happened. On page 1, the newspaper prints the minutes of the meeting, which actually occurred over two nights, 27 and 28 February. During the meeting, one committee took up a collection for assistance, another committee was appointed to gather clothing and provisions, and the group passed resolutions condemning the behavior of the Missouri authorities. Finally, on 23 March, in an apparent defense against accusations in the *Argus* that the Whigs were slacking in their assistance to the Mormons, the newspaper reminds its competitor that Lilburn Boggs, the author of the

notorious extermination order, is a Democrat.¹³

Let us take a moment to review the sequence of events. Initial reports of the Missouri troubles are filled with antipathy toward the Mormons, a prejudice that first is subject to conflicting evidence and then is entirely repudiated upon firsthand experience. But expressions of sympathy are general in nature, and no specific call to action occurs in the newspaper at any time. In fact, the initial meeting of Quincy Democratic leaders with Mormon leaders is described as secret, and even the later public meeting is not announced in the newspaper. Offers of assistance are almost immediately cast into a political framework, with help seen as being tied to political allegiance.

From this perspective, it is difficult to describe the newspapers of Quincy as opinion leaders in the initial surge of assistance to Mormon refugees. To the extent they did lead opinion, that leadership consisted of what I described earlier as agenda-setting. News accounts of the battles in Missouri and of the subsequent flight to Illinois were written in a tone of reduced initial hostility—a willingness to consider the Mormons as human beings in need of assistance rather than as dangerous fanatics who deserved only expulsion. The event was at first framed in political terms, as was the habit of newspapers of the time; then, briefly, the frame shifted to that of human suffering—but shifted back to politics almost immediately. Unlike the notorious editorializing of Thomas Sharp in the *Warsaw Signal* five years later, no direct call to action appears in the *Whig*. If we are to find a proximate cause for the Quincy citizens' charity toward the Mormons, we must look elsewhere than the newspapers.

In her book *Stump, Bar, and Pulpit*, an analysis of speech making on the Missouri frontier, Frances Lea McCurdy reminds us that it was the public meeting, not the print media, that served as the focal point for opinion leadership during this era of American history: “[T]he spoken word was [a frontiersman’s] primary source of information, inspiration, and entertainment. The public speech substituted in large measure for the absence of large collections of literature, either public or private, and the lack of education to take advantage of them, had they been available.”¹⁴ Thus, it is not surprising to read in reminiscences of this era sentiments such as this: “The people of Quincy where [the Mormons] crossed the Mississippi treated them with great kindness, gave them shelter, food and raiment—going so far even as to hold public meetings and pass resolutions denouncing those ‘Border ruffians’ of Missouri who had so cruelly misused them.”¹⁵ Similarly, John Tillson recalls in his early history of Quincy, “Several large meetings were held to consider the Mormon matter, at which strong sympathy was expressed for them,” but he makes no mention of their treatment in the public press.¹⁶ The public meetings were significant events; the press accounts were not.

It is easy to understate the importance of the newspapers of the era, however, and here I must return to the two-step flow theory of communication. Although the press may not have influenced large numbers of people, those individuals who edited, studied, and argued about the content of the frontier newspapers were the leaders of the community. Influencing those leaders would be the first step in the two-step flow, for it would be those leaders (often including the very editors of the newspapers themselves) who would then address public meetings, leading larger numbers of people to adopt their opinions. So the influence of newspapers may have been considerably greater than it would appear from the printed record. Nevertheless, on the face of things, it appears that the people of Quincy came to their considerate treatment of the Mormons who arrived during the winter of 1838–39 on their own instead of being led by their public media.

Notes

1. Bernard Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 13. I gratefully acknowledge the research assistance of my student, Ann Schmitz, in the preparation of this article.
2. Elihu Katz, "The Two-Step Flow of Communication," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21 (1957): 61–78.
3. Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States through 260 Years: 1690 to 1950*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1950).
4. William Huntzicker, "The Frontier Press, 1800–1900" in William David Sloan and James D. Startt, eds. *The Media in America: A History*, 3rd ed. (Northport, Alabama: Vision Press, 1996), 224.
5. Quincy *Whig*, 25 August 1838, 2.
6. *Ibid.*, 8 September 1838, 3.
7. *Ibid.*, 22 September 1838, 2. The "incubus" reference appears in an article printed in the 29 September issue, 2.
8. *Ibid.*, 6 October 1838, 2.
9. *Ibid.*, 17 November 1835, 2.
10. *Ibid.*, 8 December 1838, 1 and 22 December 1838, 1.
11. *Ibid.*, 23 February 1839, 1.
12. *Ibid.*, 2 March 1839, 2.
13. *Ibid.*, 16 March 1839, 1 and 23 March 1838, 1.
14. Frances Lea McCurdy, *Stump, Bar, and Pulpit: Speech Making on the Missouri Frontier* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1969), 23.
15. Eudocia Baldwin Marsh, "Mormons in Hancock County: A Reminiscence," Eds. Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 64 (1971): 31.
16. John Tillson, *History of the City of Quincy, Illinois, Revised and Corrected by Hon. William H. Collins* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., n.d. [1886?]), 68.