

## CHAPTER 2

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# Progressive Political Culture and the Widening Scope of Local Newspapers, 1880–1930

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In his 1925 article “The Natural History of the Newspaper,” sociologist Robert Park defended what many people saw as the trivial parts of the newspaper. The society weddings, the divorce announcements, the petty crime stories: “local news,” he said, “is the very stuff that democracy is made of.”<sup>1</sup> Why did such seemingly mundane local stories matter for democracy? Because they defined for readers their “village”—the group of people they knew and cared about, even if that knowledge came only through reading the news. If democracy was to survive, wrote Park, “the newspaper must continue to tell us about ourselves. We must somehow learn to know our community and its affairs in the same intimate way in which we knew them in the country villages.”<sup>2</sup>

What I am proposing in this essay is that we take Robert Park at his word, and consider the political consequences of *all* portions of daily newspapers. Coverage of local elections is obviously political news. But what about sports pages? Advice columns? Theater reviews? In my research on the metropolitan newspapers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, I have seen that these seemingly frivolous parts of the paper did hard political work, defining the scope of readers’ sympathies and, therefore, their political commitments.

At the turn of the century, city newspapers expanded dramatically, with extensive news reporting, with the new genre of “feature” news, and

with advertisements. Editors of this era assumed that readers had both personal and political stakes in their cities—that the city was, in Park’s words, their “village.” By reporting on it, papers gave readers the means to understand its problems and to rally for change. Newspapers thus gave rise to an active, civic, Progressive politics. By the 1910s and 1920s, this curious and committed local news coverage was on the wane. Many urban newspapers broadened their circulations into suburbs, small towns, and rural hamlets. Regional reporting began to crowd out urban news and features, and it pushed newspaper editorials toward a politics that benefited the metropolitan region rather than the city itself. Meanwhile, syndicates and chains gradually built a market for mass-produced news and features that spoke to national, rather than local, readerships.

The growing emphasis on regional and national news in the early twentieth century carried political consequences. Newspapers’ material often urged readers to identify more closely with their metropolitan region, with their state, or even with a particular slice of the population (athletes, teenagers, home seamstresses . . .) than with their city. Few papers reminded readers of the unique textures, peoples, and rituals of their city, and those that did tended to package the city as entertainment rather than framing it as a community in which the reader played a role.

When we ask why all the energy and momentum of Progressive politics seemed to dissipate in the 1920s, the news may, in part, offer an answer. Newspapers did not heed Robert Park’s call and “continue to tell us about ourselves.” Americans no longer read in much detail or color about their neighbors. The scope of papers’ political concern widened but also weakened. Newspapers asked readers to care about region and nation, yet encouraged them to identify only with people like themselves.

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When turn-of-the-century readers opened a copy of the *San Francisco Call*, or the *New York World*, or the *Baltimore Sun*, they encountered the city itself rendered visible, audible, and intelligible on the page. Readers could grasp the scale and energy of the city by browsing the events listings: the fifty plays and ten music concerts running at once, the hundreds of preachers, rabbis, and priests speaking to their congregations at the same time. They could visit otherwise mysterious spaces in the city—the wings of a Broadway theater, the smoky floor of a German-language cabaret—by following intrepid reporters

there. Readers could imagine the sounds of Italian or Chinese neighborhoods, because reporters spelled out accents and explained immigrant vocabulary. They might tour the dank depths of a city prison, or listen in on the dealings of the city's political bosses. Newspapers treated the city as readers' environment, their entertainment, and their object of concern.

The late nineteenth-century blossoming of local news and features—which created such rich urban experience on newspaper pages—owed more to new news technologies than to editors' civic convictions or political commitments. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, cheap wood pulp paper (as opposed to expensive rag paper) gave editors nearly endless space to fill. The invention of the stereotype plate and the halftone let every publisher illustrate his paper. Merchants pushed their way out of the classifieds and bought space to run elaborate ads. The ads themselves became incentives to print more news; if a publisher had sold eight pages worth of advertisements, he needed to come up with a respectable amount of news to run alongside. Hoe presses, gradually adopted by news publishers in the mid- to late nineteenth century, could easily print, fold, and stack separate sections. Over the course of the 1890s, newspapers became sprawling, multipart affairs, and the annual per capita consumption of newsprint rose from six to sixteen pounds.<sup>3</sup>

Editors filled their expanding papers with local material in part because it was the easiest to obtain. They could hire local reporters cheaply, and those reporters could quickly pick up leads from police stations or city missions. They could send illustrators or photographers along at no great expense. Yet editors must also have sensed readers' appetites for information about their ballooning cities. Newcomers and longtime residents, the rich and the poor, natives and immigrants were unlikely to know one another. Their everyday conversations and gossip could not catch them up on all the local news. Cities seemed to be outpacing residents' experiences and their understanding. Just at this moment, metropolitan newspapers began offering daily tours, introductions, and explanations, all for a price of just a few cents.

Articles carried readers through cities' different physical spaces and explained their specialized worlds. Illustrations brought readers to gambling dens, amusement parks, and museum galleries. Cross sections peeled back surfaces to reveal the city's many levels, layers, and systems.<sup>4</sup> The 1885 *Boston Globe's* "Scenes of the Subway" told readers about the transportation marvel being built right under their feet.<sup>5</sup> Illustrated features took readers up to the tops of the city's new skyscrapers and showed them the dazzling

views. These images helped readers to see how their urban territory fit into the rest of the city, and allowed them to imagine their lives playing out in relationship to the entire metropolis. Newspaper tours could also fortify readers' stake in their growing cities. If readers knew what went on in cities' offices, theaters, alleyways, and tunnels, it was easier to claim those cities as their own.

Turn-of-the-century newspapers offered readers an omniscient perspective on the city that rendered it quantifiable and comprehensible. Daily events listings gave readers exhilarating glimpses of the many city activities unfolding simultaneously. The *New York World's* magazine feature called "The Busiest Hour on Earth" quantified a single New York hour. The feature listed the staggering numbers of things happening in that single hour: "150,000 cross Brooklyn Bridge," "12 people die," "500,000 people dine," "39,746 letters mailed."<sup>6</sup> Real estate sections printed maps of undeveloped lots; articles on city plans gave bird's-eye views of traffic flows. Newspapers took bewildering metropolises and organized them into statistics, charts, and maps. By supplying data and some critical distance, newspapers equipped readers to change their cities in systematic and organized ways.

Turn-of-the-century "travelogues" and human interest features introduced readers to city residents of varying ethnicities, professions, tastes, and habits. The *Chicago Daily News* reprinted lengthy conversations with the city's street peddlers.<sup>7</sup> The *Milwaukee Free Press* interviewed the city's corps of messenger boys and explained their many duties.<sup>8</sup> New York City papers interviewed wig makers, casting directors, rescue workers, and bridge engineers.<sup>9</sup> Many newspaper reporters visited immigrant institutions—Jewish street stalls, Hungarian dance halls—and reported back. These articles positioned the imagined reader as culturally neutral, and the subjects as culturally exotic; it could seem that the foreign-born were always written *about*, not *for*. And yet these articles did encourage curiosity about immigrant cultures, teaching readers Yiddish expressions and explaining the queue worn by Chinese men. They acknowledged immigrants as interesting members of the urban public. And newspaper profiles gave readers deeper and more multi-dimensional understandings of their neighbors than they were likely to get on the street.

Newspaper reporters, unlike most of their readers, also dared to enter the world of the very poor. They followed crime stories into destitute households, and gave readers vicarious tours. Theodore Dreiser investigated the impoverished St. Louis household where a man had murdered his family, and

described everything from the family's pantry to their closets to their kitchen utensils.<sup>10</sup> A *New York Times* reporter talked to the unemployed men who spent their days on park benches, and told readers about the life paths that had brought the men there.<sup>11</sup> A *New York World* article on the Lower East Side's "Murderer's Alley" included a map to show readers exactly where the alley lay, and included sketches of the alley's fire escapes, its garbage, and its ragtag inhabitants.<sup>12</sup> These features traded in voyeurism and sensationalism. Yet in encouraging city dwellers to learn about each other, they forged a consciousness of "how the other half lives," and—because articles on poverty usually conveyed alarm—a sense that the situation needed to change.

Muckraking articles went even deeper into the city spaces unfamiliar to readers, and turned city dwellers' ignorance of their growing cities into part of the story. Information often failed to travel through cities' many strata of class and geography, so citizens might not learn of filth and corruption in meatpacking plants or political machines. Reporters dug into those worlds. Jacob Riis, who covered the New York City police headquarters for the *New York Tribune* and then the *New York Sun*, wrote about the misery he witnessed in the tenements, sweatshops, and flophouses of the city's poorest neighborhoods. Nell Nelson, of the 1880s *Chicago Times*, exposed dangerous conditions for women workers.<sup>13</sup> Papers in Louisville, Denver, and Philadelphia uncovered coal companies' price-fixing schemes and then distributed coal themselves to temporarily solve the problem.<sup>14</sup> In each case, reporters asserted that even in metropolises all problems could and should be made visible, and refused to resign themselves to the opaque processes and divided worlds of modern cities.

Muckraking reporters assumed and expected that readers would feel a sense of connection to their city as a whole—not just to their own class, party, neighborhood, ethnicity, or trade—and that the connection translated into a duty to solve city problems. Their articles consistently spoke of interconnected and interdependent cities. An 1897 *World* editorial called "Drag Up the Slums" drove home this idea:

It is in such places that small-pox, measles, scarlet fever, diphtheria, consumption and all the most deadly diseases breed, to spread until the cleanest and wealthiest quarters are involved.

Before New York can be a clean and healthy city the east side must be renovated with better homes, better drainage, more playgrounds, more parks and more baths.

The old proverb which says that it is our concern when the next wall is burning fits this situation exactly. If we do not drag up the slums, the slums will drag down New York.<sup>15</sup>

In this urban vision, a problem in one part of the city became everyone's problem. This stance blurred the line between altruistic reform and self-interest; the *World* editorial framed poverty as not just an evil but a threat to the middle and upper classes. Still, when papers expressed outrage about households that went without coal fires on cold nights or about neighborhoods with no green spaces, they did set the expectation that city people would notice and take responsibility for their neighbors, including the most vulnerable.

We have solid evidence that newspapers succeeded in engaging readers in the well-being of the whole urban community. Jacob Riis's articles inspired citizens and politicians to pass child labor laws, to construct city playgrounds, and to expand the Croton aqueduct, which supplied the city with uncontaminated drinking water.<sup>16</sup> The *New York Evening Globe* ran a muckraking series on tainted food production; its investigations led to arrests in the industry.<sup>17</sup> In Kansas City, the *Star* exposed an attempt to monopolize the streetcar system, and successfully campaigned for public parks and free baths.<sup>18</sup> Newspaper campaigns helped catapult cities into an age of energetic reform and established a norm of nonpartisan problem solving.

Papers in small and midsize cities tended to write in a tamer style. Working within the narrower social circles and economies of cities like Pittsburgh, Milwaukee, and Buffalo, editors had to be careful not to lose readers, advertisers, or friends with sensational reporting and populist rabble-rousing. A Charleston resident noticed the absence of such fiery news in the *Charleston News and Courier*: "It is never looking for sensations, never sticking its nose into the nether places to find out what is wrong. For this reason Charleston is poorly informed as to itself." Because neither of the city's two papers went digging for dirt, said this reader, "they do not educate their own people in political progressiveness."<sup>19</sup> Newspaper charity campaigns, however, provided a civic-minded and Progressive form of news that nearly all publishers could embrace.

In 1882, the *New York Tribune* sponsored the first long-running newspaper charity, the Fresh Air Fund, which sent New York City tenement children on two-week vacations in the countryside. The *Tribune* kept the fund's director on salary; he wrote articles that appeared in the paper nearly

every day through the spring and summer, soliciting donations.<sup>20</sup> The *New York World*, *Journal*, and *Herald* followed in the *Tribune's* footsteps. During the depressions of 1893 and 1897, each paper set up funds providing free ice, clothing, coal, and food. By the 1910s and 1920s, seemingly every city had a newspaper drive or charity. A 1921 *Philadelphia North American* article described fundraising “porch parties” held all over town and ran photographs of the disabled children who would be helped by the funds.<sup>21</sup> The *Cleveland News* enlisted readers and teachers to nominate needy children for its Christmas drive, and ran stories on exceptionally generous donors.<sup>22</sup> In smaller cities working to boost their own reputations, newspaper charity campaigns could rally for improvements without admitting that there was anything wrong to begin with, as when the *Tacoma Ledger and News* raised money for a high school stadium and a YMCA building.<sup>23</sup>

Charity articles’ savvy strategies created an emotional connection between reader and subject, or between the reader and a larger community. Excerpted letters or quoted conversations put readers into print dialogue with those receiving aid.<sup>24</sup> The *New York Times*’ “Neediest Cases” profiles devoted special attention to subjects’ endearing qualities and their sympathetic situations. “No one can help liking 11-year-old Jimmy Sharp, and no one can help smiling into the joyous little face, with its brown eyes, wide mouth, and straight, narrow nose,” explained one 1918 profile.<sup>25</sup> Nearly all charity drives printed lists of donations every day or week. By gathering names together on a page, around a shared cause, these lists created print representations of communities in which every member mattered. Finally, newspaper charities showcased readers’ generosity and caring by reprinting the letters that came in with donations. “Please give this money to the Neediest Cases,” wrote Elihu Robinson of Newark, in a letter reprinted by the *New York Times*. “My sister and I saved it for Christmas gifts for our family, but we decided that these cases need it more.”<sup>26</sup>

The carefully crafted image of a benevolent and effective community was in many ways a fantasy that existed only in print. Yet charity articles successfully mobilized city readers. *New York Tribune* subscribers, for example, donated anywhere from \$18,000 to \$52,000 to the Fresh Air Fund in every year between 1882 and 1912, and sent between four and fifteen thousand tenement children annually on countryside vacations.<sup>27</sup> By implying that all city dwellers ought to care about the health and welfare of all others, newspapers’ charity campaigns fashioned their reading audiences into more involved and reform-minded publics.

When in 1911 O. H. Chamberlain, a *Chicago Tribune* reader, wrote a short essay expressing his opinion of the newspaper, he revealed how the paper had in fact shaped his own relationship with and attitude toward his city. "I have felt that the 'Tribune,' with other Chicagoans, was too complacent with Chicago," he wrote. "I love Chicago, and yet I never can become used to some of the horrors here. The Harrison Street police station, the levee, the food adulterations, and the conditions which make little children suffer, are some of the municipal sores which, to me, deserve the front page forever."<sup>28</sup> Chamberlain complained that the *Tribune* did not devote enough space to the city's problems. Yet the source that most likely taught him about those problems was the *Tribune* itself. None of these issues (except for food adulteration) would have directly affected a middle-class Chicagoan, and yet they pained and urgently concerned this reader. Newspapers' city articles, by widening readers' circles of concern beyond their own jobs, families, and neighborhoods, encouraged readers to become civically invested. In the case of Mr. Chamberlain, at least, it worked.

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The expanding cities, new technologies, and curious reading audiences of the late nineteenth century had rendered it both popular and profitable for papers to report in great detail on their own populations. Yet these cities, technologies, and audiences continued to evolve, and what had once been profitable did not remain so. Suburban growth began to outpace urban growth; distribution networks spread newspapers ever farther outside cities; and syndicate services turned daily news into a standardized, mass-manufactured product. By the 1910s and 1920s these changes had turned the focus of city newspapers from inward to outward, from urban to regional, from local to national. Newspapers that had once inspired Progressive reforms became agents of a blander, more passive participation in regional and national culture.

City newspapers had made efforts to attract suburban readers as early as the 1870s and 1880s, when they ran short "Suburban" columns. These sections seemed to expand each decade, until by 1927, the *New York Herald Tribune* was printing eight pages of society news from the boroughs, Westchester, Connecticut, and New Jersey.<sup>29</sup> Many publishers used their classifieds to hold onto suburban readers; the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Chicago Tribune* both operated dozens of branch offices in peripheral neighborhoods



and suburbs.<sup>30</sup> It made financial sense for newspapers to pursue suburban readers; turn-of-the-century suburbanites did much of their shopping in the city, so city advertisers were eager to reach them.

When it came to farther-flung populations, most nineteenth-century city dailies had not bothered to solicit their subscriptions. But in the 1880s, the Post Office contracted with regional railroads to run the first express mail trains, and in 1885, it dropped the postal rate for newspapers to one cent per pound.<sup>31</sup> After these changes, residents of Dubuque or Peoria could subscribe to Chicago papers for just slightly more than Chicago residents paid, and they would receive their papers on the morning that they were printed.<sup>32</sup> The passage of Parcel Post, in 1913, drastically lowered the shipping fees for small packages, which created a strong incentive for advertisers to reach rural readers and offer them goods by mail. City papers' Sunday editions became veritable mail-order catalogs, with detailed illustrations of goods that rural people could order from city shops. Cars again expanded urban papers' trade radius. Regional traffic through cities meant that nearly any kind of urban retailer could improve sales by advertising in newspapers to readers within a day's drive.

In pursuit of regional audiences (and the advertising business they would bring), city papers created regional editions and gathered more regional news. E. W. Scripps created a Kentucky edition of his *Cincinnati Post* in the 1880s, and Joseph Pulitzer printed a special New Jersey edition of the *New York World*.<sup>33</sup> By the 1920s, the *Des Moines Register* and *Tribune* (morning and evening papers with the same owner) were reprinting their front pages up to twenty times to appeal specially to the interests of readers in different regions of Iowa.<sup>34</sup> The 1920s *Chicago Tribune* printed a special Springfield edition, which focused on Illinois rather than Chicago politics. Printers shipped that edition off extra early so that readers in central and southern Illinois would have papers waiting on their doorsteps in the morning.<sup>35</sup>

Not every paper prioritized suburban or regional audiences. The *Chicago Daily News*, the *New York World*, and the *Cleveland Press*, for example, focused on pleasing city readers and therefore reported intensively on city issues.<sup>36</sup> But the many papers that catered to suburban and regional readers created notably regional political platforms. The *Boston Post*, which claimed the biggest Sunday circulation in New England at the turn of the century, advocated for "the advance of New England"—not just Boston—on its editorial page.<sup>37</sup> Regional papers in the 1920s stopped talking about the urban

problems that turn-of-the-century papers had rallied around, such as crowded slums, dirty water, and sweatshops. They focused instead on suburban and regional infrastructure. The *Chicago Tribune* printed its platform “For Chicago” above each day’s editorials beginning around 1920, advocating for a commuter trolley system, wide roads into the country, and regional rail stations.<sup>38</sup> The paper added a platform “For the Middle West” on Sundays, which included regional highway systems and flood prevention for the Mississippi.<sup>39</sup>

Articles on regional history and landscapes turned newspapers into stewards of metropolitan and regional identity over and above urban identity. The *Columbia State* explored South Carolina’s history and its wildlife in its Sunday editions.<sup>40</sup> The 1920s *Baltimore Sun* ran a series of articles on Maryland’s twenty-three counties and then published them as a book, *The Spirit of Maryland*.<sup>41</sup> *Chicago Tribune* reporter James O’Donnell Bennett set out on a motoring tour of the Midwest in 1926, and in the resulting series of articles he coined the term “Chicagoland.”<sup>42</sup>

By the late 1920s, one could learn as much about suburban and rural life in the pages of the daily newspaper as about city life. Readers encountered stories on suburban high school sports, columns full of suburban weddings, and listings for suburban theaters. They saw images of freestanding single-family homes (rather than apartments) and read about players’ golf scores at suburban country clubs. Department store ads no longer presumed that readers would be familiar with downtown; they spelled out streetcar routes, driving instructions, and parking locations. Catering to rural readers, city papers regularly ran poultry pages, advice columns on potato blight or sheep shearing, and advertisements for tractors.

These more regional papers of the 1910s and 1920s did not drop urban features entirely, but they often collected them in new “Metropolitan” sections that assumed less familiarity with city life than had urban features of previous decades. Artfully observed and illustrated vignettes could function as complete substitutes for, rather than supplements to, city life. The *Chicago Herald’s* Sunday “Humor and City Life” section printed a series of illustrations, “Our Neighbors Across the Way,” that reproduced the mini-dramas urbanites glimpsed through their neighbors’ windows.<sup>43</sup> Editors ran features that defined and publicized their cities’ distinctive traits, effectively “branding” their city. The *Philadelphia Public Ledger* constructed local identity out of local history; its fictionalized columnists bore the names of city founders and prominent families.<sup>44</sup> Articles that slickly packaged urban life moved

newspapers away from Progressivism's earnest engagement and quest to improve urban community.

As many papers shifted their focus from urban to metropolitan and regional, they also came to rely on syndicated news. By the early twentieth century, independent companies—the Central Press Association, McNaught Syndicate, Metropolitan Newspaper Service—offered features such as comic strips, advice columns, or even entire Sunday magazines for purchase. The nation's biggest newspapers, too, began to sell single articles, full-page features, and entire sections to papers in midsize and smaller cities. Syndication offered the editors of smaller papers material they could never have afforded to commission themselves, such as on-the-ground reporting on the Russo-Japanese war, expert instruction on sprinting technique, or beauty tips from film stars. Readers then came to expect the more lavish, global, and cosmopolitan news that syndicates made possible.

Syndication turned local papers into much leaner operations, since they outsourced so much of their labor. By the 1920s the typical newspaper's Sunday staff dwindled from a turn-of-the-century high of dozens to just a handful of editors who selected and laid out syndicated content.<sup>45</sup> Successful editors often spent more time assembling choice syndicated features than commissioning local reports. In a critique of the syndication system, journalist Will Irwin quoted a newspaper executive who compared a newspaper editor to “a moving-picture exhibitor. He doesn't have a thing to do with production of the film he runs. He just looks over the offerings of the production company, selects the one that he most believes in, dresses up the house a little, and runs them.”<sup>46</sup> Not surprisingly, many local papers lost much of their distinctiveness. A reader in Albuquerque found his city's two papers “monotonously alike. Both print practically the same news matter, the same cuts, and sometimes even identical editorials. Like other papers of this size, they are dependent upon the great news-gathering associations and upon the so-called plate services for much of their material; hence their similarity to each other and to the thousand and one other papers of the country.”<sup>47</sup>

Newspaper chains, like syndicates, capitalized on economies of scale in the news industry, and as a consequence they de-emphasized and defunded local reporting. Ira Copley bought out the midsize cities of California, while Gannett Newspapers seemed to control all of upstate New York. By 1923, thirty-one chains accounted for one-third of the nation's total daily circulation, and nearly one-half of its Sunday circulation. William Randolph

Hearst owned twenty-two major metropolitan newspapers by 1930; E. W. Scripps owned twenty-five.<sup>48</sup> By 1935 Hearst alone would control 11.1 percent of daily circulation in the U.S.<sup>49</sup>

The papers in the Hearst chain upended the standard newspaper formula that had emerged in U.S. cities over the preceding three decades. Instead of hiring a solid team of local reporters and supplementing their work with syndicated features, Hearst built his papers around shared material and merely decorated them with local news. He ran the column “Today, by Arthur Brisbane” as the front-page featured editorial of every paper he owned. Editors at each paper sprinkled just a few local features among the syndicated stories, such as the *Wisconsin News*’s “The Inquisitive Reporter,” which polled random Milwaukee citizens on mundane questions such as “On what salary should a man marry?” or “Have you found stout persons better natured than thin ones?”<sup>50</sup> E. W. Scripps’s chain of papers, too, skimmed on local news; for every four local stories that appeared in his competitors’ pages, Scripps’s papers ran only one.<sup>51</sup>

Syndicated material could highlight commonalities and nurture affinities. But rather than speaking to populations that shared a city, syndicated articles spoke to groups that shared a circumstance or an interest. Feature writers targeted a range of demographics: new mothers, motorists, gardeners, bicyclists, outdoorsmen. All of these populations, not coincidentally, made prime targets for a corresponding set of advertisers. Syndicate writers drafted their articles to appeal to home cooks or radio enthusiasts across all U.S. regions, and made sure that their messages harmonized with the kinds of advertisements that local papers placed alongside them. So the political stakes that had been present in local news essentially evaporated in these syndicated features, which connected the reader only to an amorphous, anonymous population of other readers with similar interests.

Early syndicated material, appearing from the 1890s through the 1910s, did treat urban experiences, but those experiences were generic ones, applicable to nearly any city. Syndicates used the ethnic humor of only the most common immigrant groups, such as the Irish “Mr. Dooley” and the German “Katzenjammer Kids.” “Among Us Mortals, by W. E. Hill”—distributed by the *Chicago Tribune*—observed city people in broadly recognizable scenarios: “The Amateur Vaudeville,” “The Apartment House,” and “At the Jeweller’s.”<sup>52</sup> By the 1920s, many syndicates’ journalists stopped commenting upon the urban experience altogether. Because features that spoke only to big-city readers would not sell well in smaller cities, towns, or suburbs, most syndicate

writers and illustrators instead played upon issues and situations familiar to nearly anyone, no matter where they lived. The syndicated feature “Home Town Folks” chatted with readers about all the conflicts and desires of various household members.<sup>53</sup> George Ade’s series “In Our Town,” which appeared in the mass-produced *Illustrated Sunday Magazine*, sketched characters familiar to any community, such as “The Actor” longing to see his name in lights.<sup>54</sup> When the city did appear in 1920s syndicated material, journalists presented it less as a familiar context than as a fantasy setting. The lavishly illustrated series “The Adventures of Prudence Prim,” running in Hearst’s *American Weekly*, chronicled the escapades of a young woman visiting New York. Rather than setting Prudence in scenarios familiar to city readers—the office, the streetcar, the luncheonette—cartoonist Nell Brinkley sent her off to late-night cabarets and luxurious beauty parlors.<sup>55</sup> In features like this, the city became a space of exotic intrigue rather than shared everyday experience.

A new crop of syndicated features addressed broad, universal needs and experiences rather than particular interests. Journalism professors and syndicate managers urged writers to stick to a few essential categories. Willard G. Bleyer listed “the fundamental sources of satisfaction” in a 1919 manual, including “(1) timely topics, (2) unique, novel, and extraordinary persons, things, and events, (3) mysteries, (4) romance, (5) adventure, (6) contests for supremacy, (7) children, (8) animals.”<sup>56</sup> Syndicated authors earned royalties proportional to the number of papers that bought their pieces, so they worked hard to craft articles with the broadest possible appeal.

The rise of nationalized news carried several consequences for news readers, and I believe it carried broad ramifications for the politics of the early twentieth century. Syndicated news laid the foundations of a truly national culture; its features encouraged Americans to build the same houses, play the same games, and use the same words. Newspapers helped to construct a broadly understood American “way of life” that would become a touchstone of U.S. domestic politics and international relations through the entire twentieth century. When wartime propaganda marshaled residents’ pride in the American way, or when radio or television pandered to audiences’ commonalities, they did so using the shared vocabularies and shared values that newspapers had helped to spread.

But as syndication—as well as metropolitan and regional news—built up new kinds of affinities, commitments, and commonalities, it diminished or even devastated local feature reporting. It is worth asking whether the shrinking presence of local news and features damaged Progressive urban

politics not only for concrete reasons (since readers learned less about their cities than they had in the past) but also for less tangible ones. Newspapers no longer covered urban populations as though the fate of every group mattered to every other. They no longer assumed that readers felt a strong loyalty and duty to their city. The widening scope of the local newspaper channeled readers' sympathies and directed their attention to their regions, to their nation, and to the world. Syndicated features helped them to recognize qualities and interests that they shared with readers all over the country. But readers no longer heard much about their neighbors. "We must somehow learn to know our community and its affairs in the same intimate way in which we knew them in the country villages." By the time Robert Park wrote this in 1925, newspapers may not have been of much help with his project.