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The Role of Newspaper Syndicates, 1860–1900

Charles Johanningsmeier

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

Newspaper syndicates of the late nineteenth century: overlooked forces in the American literary marketplace

For the most part the newspaper syndicate is the sewer of the author.

Edward W. Bok, “The Modern Literary King,” *Forum*, 1895

The newspaper has not only monopolized the news – its proper field – but it has drawn to itself the best of literature. Both magazines and publishers of books complain that the newspapers are more attractive to writers and pay more than they can afford, while their cheapness appeals to the readers. To the future historian the point is not without interest.

Worthington C. Ford, Report to the American Antiquarian Society Council, 1918¹

The Ansel Nash Kellogg Company; the American Press Association; the Western Newspaper Union; S. S. McClure’s Associated Literary Press; the syndicates of Irving Bacheller; Tillotson’s Newspaper Fiction Bureau; the Authors’ Alliance; the Authors’ Syndicate; the Editors’ Literary Syndicate; the United Press; the International Literary and News Syndicate. American newspaper readers of the late nineteenth century in rural areas, small towns, and large cities throughout the country were very familiar with either the names or the work of these syndicates, which supplied printed material in various forms to the rapidly increasing number of country weeklies and metropolitan dailies. Through their operations, a single written work would appear simultaneously in from twenty to perhaps 1,000 newspapers across the United States. Most important for this study, these syndicates distributed thousands of short stories and novels in serial form. Every major American and British fiction author of this period had at least one work first published through the syndicates, and from 1861 to 1900 these organizations probably exposed a greater number of American readers to more works of fiction than

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did books and magazines of all kinds. Today, however, few students of American literature even recognize the names. No systematic study of their operations and role in the literary marketplace has been done, and thus the available information about them consists mainly of scattered scraps tucked away inconspicuously in biographies, bibliographies, or surveys of the rise of the American newspaper. Given the size and influence of the syndicates, the paucity of information about them is striking.

I

There are many reasons why newspaper syndicates can no longer be overlooked by literary scholars, chief among them that they afford entry into an almost completely neglected fiction publishing venue: the newspaper. The increases in production and readership of American newspapers between 1860 and 1900 were phenomenal; newspapers became a part of the lives of almost every American. There were 4,051 different newspapers published in the United States in 1860, with 387 of these being dailies and 3,173 being weeklies. By 1899, there were 18,793 newspapers published in the United States; 2,226 were dailies and 12,979 were weeklies.² Given that the vast majority of daily and weekly newspapers included syndicated fiction, the readership for these materials was quite large. One syndicate alone, McClure's Associated Literary Press, distributed 155 short stories and one serial novel in 1885 and 119 short stories and 16 serial novels in 1899, each of them to an average of 20 newspapers, from Boston to San Francisco, with circulation per newspaper ranging from 10,000 to 120,000 copies. If one accepts the usual estimate of three readers per copy, this one syndicate thus made fiction available to at least as many readers in a year as did any of the supposedly pioneering national mass-market magazines founded in the late 1880s and early 1890s.

Syndicates are also important because they reached different readers than those previously believed by scholars to have been the main audience during this period for what middle-class cultural arbiters of the time deemed "quality" fiction. (While in the last twenty years literary scholars have largely deconstructed the terms of "quality," "serious," "popular," and "artistic" fiction and literature, for the purposes of this study it is useful to acknowledge the distinctions made at the time by critics and others between "quality"

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fiction that was supposedly more “serious” and “artistic” and written not primarily for financial ends, and “popular” fiction that was allegedly written solely for commercial purposes and intended only to amuse readers.)³ The readers of syndicated fiction were of both genders and came not only from a wide geographical expanse outside of the Northeastern United States but also from a broad socioeconomic spectrum. This was made possible by their unique distribution system. Syndicates were often based in New York or other East Coast cities, but the points of actual publication were decentralized in cities across the country. Unlike magazine, book, and story paper publishers, syndicates (except for readyprint syndicates) did not produce already laid-out, complete print products in New York, Boston, or Philadelphia and then ship these bulky works throughout the country to subscribers and jobbers. Instead, most syndicates sent stereotype plates, flong mats, or galley proofs via the mail or rail express services to newspaper editors in Toledo, Minneapolis, New Orleans, and Los Angeles, among other places, and allowed them to incorporate these fictions into their newspapers however they chose. These newspapers were subsequently widely circulated throughout the regional market area in general stores and by periodical kiosk vendors, newsboys, and the postal system. In addition, because newspapers sold for an average price during this period of either 2 or 3 cents daily and 5 cents on Sunday or weekly, they and their fictions were easily available to a broad socioeconomic group that previously had been shut out from first publication reading of “quality” fiction by the 25 or 35 cent price of a literary magazine or \$1.25 or \$1.50 for a cloth-covered book. However, although syndicated fiction ended up inadvertently benefiting lower-class readers with little money to spend on reading materials, newspaper editors aimed their choice of syndicated fiction primarily at the middle-class female reader, who was presumed to have the buying power to purchase the goods advertised in the newspaper. In general, editors hoped that syndicated fiction would appeal to female readers as well as the traditional male newspaper reader, thus creating a higher readership in general and thereby boosting advertising revenues. Overall, then, the syndicates reached the new, more diverse national audience slightly before mass-market magazines did in the 1890s.

Furthermore, the syndicates helped create unique sites of interaction between readers and fiction texts. The contexts in which

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syndicated fictions were presented to and read by readers differed radically from those that obtained in the case of books and, to a lesser extent, magazines. Newspaper editors during this time created intertextual printed salad bowls where non-fiction stories and advertisements mixed on the pages with syndicated fiction, and these visual and ideological melanges undoubtedly helped influence readers in their attitudes towards such fictional works. In addition, readers clearly read newspapers in different environments and approached reading with a different attitude than they did books and magazines. Only in the past few years have some scholars begun to appreciate the difference between reading short stories and novels in magazines rather than in books; no one, however, has yet taken newspapers into account.⁴ Scholars interested in understanding how millions of nineteenth-century American readers interacted with fiction texts and in general how the contexts of the reading experience influence interpretation should be very interested in the newspaper as a venue.

Another reason to investigate the syndicates is that they played a vital role in the professionalization of the fiction author. Their operations demanded that they procure many times the number of fictional works that magazines could publish in a year; as a result they supported a large number of authors of all levels of popularity and critical reputation. Syndicates purchased works from a very heterogeneous group that included authors whose names are unrecognized today, those who were once popular but are now known only to a few, and many authors who have been and are the object of extensive scholarly research, such as Henry James, William Dean Howells, Mark Twain, Mary E. Wilkins (Freeman), Sarah Orne Jewett, Charles Chesnut, Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, Stephen Crane, H. G. Wells, and Jack London. The syndicates were important outlets for the work of all of these authors. What most attracted them was that some syndicates were often able to offer higher sums for their works than individual magazines could and also a great deal of publicity. The competition between syndicates and magazines for authors' works had a far-reaching impact on the profession of authorship.

Possibly most important, syndicates represent an important but overlooked stage in the evolution of the American literary publishing industry. Most literary historians narrate the development of the relationship between the author and the publishing industry in the

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late nineteenth century as proceeding directly from the stable era of “Gentlemanly Publishing” (to use Susan Coultrap-McQuin’s term), when literature was produced and published by a relatively small group of persons with “serious” artistic tastes and intentions, to the more plebeian, competitive environment dominated by the impersonal organizational structures of the mass-market magazines founded in the 1890s. These were supposedly headed by commercial-minded, autocratic editors who regarded literature as a commodity like any other and who hegemonically controlled and manipulated their authors and readers.⁵ However, the organizational structure and operational methods of most syndicates bore little resemblance to those of magazines. To a great extent, the syndicates represent a transitional stage between the more personalized “old-fashioned” literary publishing industry (although one must be careful not to over-romanticize it) and the highly-capitalized and complexly organized one of the mass-market magazines and modern book publishing houses.

II

The role of these syndicates may be almost forgotten today, but in the late nineteenth century syndicates were given their due as major factors in the literary marketplace. They were mentioned in numerous periodical articles, and there were frequent debates about their impact on authors, publishers, and readers. The editor of the *Journalist* magazine introduced an 1888 article on the subject of syndicates: “They are here and are growing rich and powerful. The very fact that they provoke much discussion, criticism and praise, is proof positive that they are a very live factor in newspaper work.” Detailed knowledge of the syndicates is assumed in almost all contributions to the debate. One commentator in *Writer* (New York) magazine could in 1888 “presume that everybody knows by this time what is the province of the syndicates.”⁶

Unfortunately, for the most part only one side of the debate about the syndicates has been passed down over the years. The view that has held most stubbornly is that expressed in a stinging diatribe written in 1895 by Edward W. Bok, editor of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*. In a *Forum* magazine article entitled “The Modern Literary King,” Bok surveyed the American literary scene and could see nothing but decay. Bok argued that authors no longer wrote to share their

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divinely inspired artistic visions with others but now were solely influenced by money, the “modern literary king.” In this mad, competitive rush for money, the old, stable bonds between publishers and authors had been broken. Bok placed the blame for this state of affairs almost entirely on the newspaper syndicates, which supposedly had come between authors and respectable publishers and turned the author “into a veritable machine” who wrote works “to order.” “The syndicate is in business for money: for literature it cares very little,” he alleged, adding that because syndicates lacked standards and taste, they took the second-class work of famous and not-so-famous authors and paid high rates for it, thereby enervating literature as a whole.⁷

What has gone unnoticed, however, is that Bok – like many of those who criticized the syndicates – was not a disinterested party in the matter. Founder of a short-lived syndicate himself in 1886 and editor of the *Ladies' Home Journal* from 1889 to 1919, he competed directly against the syndicates for the work of many authors. In 1891, for instance, S. S. McClure had outmaneuvered and outbid him for serial rights to Mark Twain's novel *The American Claimant* (1892). Bok's assessment of the syndicates was thus not objective; furthermore, it was not universally shared. Opposing voices who defended the syndicates at the time and pointed out their positive contributions problematize Bok's judgment. For example, one of his contemporaries countered many of the popular arguments against the syndicates when he wrote, “The [syndicate] system enables newspapers to obtain first-class articles at a moderate cost – while the middleman is able to pay authors high prices, and to introduce them to a larger circle of readers than they could obtain through any magazine, or book.” Another concluded, “the syndicate system is doubtless a benefit to the writer, the publisher and the public,” because with it, “the well-known author can command a higher price for his work . . . than any individual publication is willing to pay him,” and receive wide publicity; he added that “the public is also a gainer, in being afforded an early reading of fiction of the first quality.”⁸

For many reasons, researching the true history of the syndicates in order to offer a more sober assessment of the role they played in American literary history is a difficult task. One reason is that the subject is immense and largely uncharted; there is very little previous scholarship to consult and build on. There are also practical obstacles to overcome, such as the relative inaccessibility of impor-

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tant relevant materials. Quite often the newspapers in which syndicated fiction appeared were not saved before the acidic content of the paper itself reduced them to yellow dust. In addition, even when such newspapers are available, the inquiring scholar must be extremely patient to scroll through roll after roll of microfilm and try to decipher the small print of these papers. The lack of adequate indexing in all but a few instances also greatly deters exploration of this print medium. Despite all of these obstacles, however, it was possible to find a great deal of material about these syndicates and their operations. This book gathers the numerous scraps of contemporary accounts, information gleaned from numerous hours of looking at microfilm of old newspapers, the smaller amount of published secondary information on the syndicates, and a great deal of unpublished archival material, and consolidates it all to provide the first detailed histories of these syndicates.

In fact, in order to make this study more manageable for both the writer and the reader, some limitations have been imposed. To some extent the availability of materials helped define the scope of the present work: archival materials and information on some of the syndicates – those of S. S. McClure, Irving Bacheller, Tillotson and Son's, Ansel Nash Kellogg, and the American Press Association – is more available than on others. In addition, it begins in 1861, the year when Ansel Nash Kellogg first printed “patent inside” newspapers in Baraboo, Wisconsin; it continues to 1900. The choice of 1900 as an ending point is in some ways arbitrary and in other ways not. Syndicates did not stop distributing fiction to newspapers in 1900; in fact, they continued to operate for many years after this. After about 1900, however, an increasing percentage of syndicated fictions were not original publications but rather reprints, having first appeared in book and magazine form. The year 1900 is also a convenient stopping place because the second largest American galley-proof syndicate of this time, Irving Bacheller's, folded in 1898, and the attempt of William Dean Howells to gather well-known authors into a syndicate failed in 1899. Worthington Ford in 1918 might still write that the newspaper “has drawn to itself the best of literature,” but in general the comments of Hamlin Garland in 1902 that “There are, I believe, fewer stories printed serially in the newspapers now than ten years ago,” and the “The story syndicates are passing rather than coming on” were accurate assessments.⁹

This book also confines itself to prose fiction printed in American

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daily and weekly newspapers, printed sheets whose primary content is news, not fiction. Except for a brief description of them in chapter 1, family story papers such as the New York *Ledger* and Gleason's *Pictorial Weekly* are excluded, because they included little news, and syndicates marketed few materials to them. Furthermore, only syndication in United States newspapers is included in any depth. While the American operations of the British syndicate of Tillotson's Newspaper Fiction Bureau are examined, the operations of Tillotson's and various American syndicates in the United Kingdom, Continental Europe, Australia, India, and other British colonies are not. Finally, because of the limited space available, the relations between the syndicates and only a relatively small number of fiction authors are detailed, although every effort has been made to ensure that they constitute a representative sample.

III

Within these parameters, this book will provide what anthropologist Clifford Geertz would call a "thick description" of these syndicates and how they procured, processed, and disseminated fiction. To comprehend how the syndicates generated their cultural product, however, requires more than just a descriptive history. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's advice is heeded here; she argues that "History, at least good history, in contrast to antiquarianism, is inescapably structural . . . by structural, I mean that history must disclose and reconstruct the conditions of consciousness and action."¹⁰ What little history has been written of the syndicates has implied that the personalities of individual syndicate managers were the sole governing factors in each syndicate's operations. This work, however, attempts to offer a description of certain types of organizations rather than a biography of their managers. It recognizes that syndicates did not have a single *mentalité* of operation, since each functioned differently according to the persons involved, the programs of the firms, and the operating capital available to them. At the same time, since all syndicates of each type (readyprint, plate, and galley-proof) shared a roughly common organizational structure with other syndicates in the same category, one can justify grouping them together and making some generalizations based on evidence gleaned from only a few of them.

Moreover, in this work the history and operations of these

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syndicates in relation to other print media and their representatives will be documented, but this information will not function as mere background to fiction texts. Too often an amorphous agent called capitalist “power” or “the ‘inevitable’ forces of urbanization, commercialization, and industrialization” are invoked as responsible for historical change or cultural production.¹¹ This work instead uses the information available to examine how not only the personalities of the syndicators themselves but also specific historical and cultural conditions of the period – technological advances, economic concerns, cultural prejudices, and copyright laws – influenced the organizational modus operandi of the syndicates and the cultural products they produced.

Even more specifically, in chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7, this work asks and attempts to answer a number of vital questions about the hegemonic power of the syndicates in the marketplace. First, how did the newspaper syndicate outlet influence what fiction authors produced and how they did it? Did it force them to become mere “wordsmiths under contract,” as is commonly charged, or did it empower authors and afford them relative artistic freedom? Were authors forced or prompted to produce more short stories and works with less characterization and more action to suit the supposed itinerant newspaper reader? Did they choose certain subjects over others in an attempt to appeal to the newspaper audience? Second, were the syndicates the forerunners of the kind of centralized editorial control later exerted by editors and publishers of national magazines in the 1890s? Third, what degree of freedom – of both choice and interpretation – did the syndicates offer readers? Overall, do the newspaper syndicates support or refute the claims of many scholars that, as in other industries, the production and consumption of American literature during this time became more urban-oriented and centrally controlled, usually from New York City? Intertwined with all of these questions is the issue of the stringency of the operating limitations: who or what generated them, and how were they made known or “enforced”?

Related questions will also be investigated. For instance, how and why did newspaper syndication of fiction threaten the arbiters of “high” culture of the period? Were the managers of these syndicates actually uneducated materialists who cared only for the financial bottom line and believed literature could be manufactured like iron stoves, as they have sometimes been portrayed? What factors were

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primarily responsible for the gradual disappearance of first publication syndicated fiction from the newspaper? Finally, what were the implications of the end of this era for the average reader and American print culture as a whole?

Up to this point the voices that have spoken for the entire text of syndicate history have been almost exclusively negative ones. Allegations as to the low quality of literary work distributed through the syndicates and the heavy-handed treatment of authors by syndicators have been made on the slightest of evidence. Many of these charges are colored by cultural biases and rely on incomplete evidence; they come closer to rumor and myth than to historical accuracy. Too often, for example, literary scholars have unquestioningly sided with authors who claimed they were “wronged” by the syndicates because businessmen such as syndicators are often seen as enemies to art. These negative views of the syndicates, however, should not be accepted as the last word without more extensive investigation. Here the numerous more positive voices – those of authors, critics, agents, and readers – that have not been heard will join the negative ones. This is not, though, a simple defense of the syndicates. Rather, it is an attempt to test the commonly held assumptions about the syndicates and to adjudicate the debate over their role and significance.