

Newspapers

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A newspaper is a publication intended for a broad audience that appears regularly, often daily, and claims to contain factual accounts of recent events. Usually newspapers are published with the intention of making a profit. Frequently, their factual content is accompanied by advertisements and non-factual material intended as entertainment.



Journalists often boast that they write “the rough draft of history.” The key point here is *rough draft*. Newspapers are written in haste and often contain inadvertent factual errors, large and small. Moreover, a newspaper’s “factual” content is determined by its point of view or bias. This point of view is shaped by the political positions taken by editors and publishers, and sometimes shaped by the newspaper’s commercial relationship with advertisers. It is also shaped by a newspaper’s location. For example, the *St. Petersburg Times* might call a hurricane in Florida a terrible catastrophe, while a newspaper in Idaho might ignore it entirely.

Newspapers from the past contain several kinds of information for historians. They offer factual accounts of events such as earthquakes, battles, and elections. Historians often mine newspapers for basic information about who did what, when, how, and where. Newspapers are also filled with contextual information, such as advertisements and features, from which historians can build a more complete picture of the world in which a particular event took place.

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Posasda broadsheet

Newspapers first appeared in Europe in the mid-17th century. They evolved gradually from a similar type of publication called a broadsheet—a single sheet of paper that responded to unusual events. Although newspapers today and those in the past resemble one another in many ways, newspapers and their content have changed dramatically over time. Newspapers in different societies are often quite different from those you may be familiar with. Thus, it is important to read newspapers from different times (and places) carefully.

For example, this is the front page of the *Times of London*, one of the most complete and accurate newspapers in the world in the mid-1800s, on the morning after the Battle of Gettysburg, a major historical event. Someone reading this paper in the 21st century might be surprised to find nothing about the battle, but the timely and broad coverage we now expect was not always available.



The Times of London, July 6, 1863

Technological innovation made the modern newspaper possible. Before the late-19th century, paper was often made from textile fibers like cotton and linen, frequently taken from recycled rags. Only after the invention of paper made from wood pulp did low-cost, low-quality paper become readily available. The rise of the paper industry made paper cheap, which meant that newspapers could be printed for reasonable prices. Industrialization and new global markets, especially in raw materials, helped to increase production leading to inexpensive, mass-produced paper.



Wooden printing press c. 1690-1700 from the collections of the National Technical Museum Prague, Czech Republic

Changes in print technology influenced newspaper production as well. Print began with individual metal letters placed by hand in special grids. The letters were inked and then paper was pressed on one sheet at a time. Technological innovations steadily decreased the amount of effort and increased the speed at which words could be printed onto paper.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, it also became easier and cheaper to move information across long distances, which had a huge impact on the newspaper business. Railroads and steamships made long-distance travel easier and faster beginning in the early 19th century, so reporters could travel to interesting events. With the invention of the telegraph in the mid-19th century, traveling correspondents could report back to newspapers regularly and rapidly. Images, too, could be sent over the wires, and as photographic technology improved in the second half of the 19th century, news photos became a reality.

As words and pictures moved ever more quickly around the world in the 20th century, newspapers began to rely on wire services like Reuters and *Agence-France Presse*. These services had reporters and photographers based all over the world, and they enabled newspapers that could not hire foreign correspondents to cover distant events quickly and in detail.

The rise of the wire services also caused increasing similarities in the content of newspapers from different places. Beginning with World War II, reports of non-local events were similar in newspapers from the Philippines to Nova Scotia. Newspaper readers sometimes recognize this phenomenon immediately from the bylines—the line at the beginning of the story bearing the author's name—of newspaper stories. If a story is attributed to UPI (United Press International) or a similar organization, rather than an individual reporter, it comes from a wire service and is often reprinted in hundreds of different newspapers. Syndication through wire services also led to the advent of features—comic strips, advice columns, editorial cartoons, opinion columns, and even weather reports and movie reviews—shared among many newspapers.

As the price of paper and printing dropped, and as access to information from faraway places became faster and easier, newspapers grew larger and appeared more frequently. They changed from occasional broadsheets to regularly issued almanacs to daily papers to papers with several editions per day. In the past decade, the advent of the Internet as a mass communications medium also has helped speed up the news cycle: Some stories now appear on newspaper websites in multiple editions, written and rewritten over the course of the day. This can create confusion when archiving or citing newspaper stories for those researching recent history.

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Historians generally use newspapers for three purposes: learning facts about specific events; looking for long-term trends; and searching for details or the “texture” surrounding an event—a fact or story that illuminates or complicates a larger pattern. Newspapers are often the first kind of source historians of the past two centuries will turn to for gathering evidence, but historians rarely rely on newspaper evidence alone.

Learning Facts

Newspapers can be used to locate facts related to a specific event. Historians investigating a specific event sometimes use newspapers from the place and time in which the event occurred to uncover details and perhaps find first-hand descriptions. But when historians use newspapers in this way, they proceed with caution, as newspapers often include factual errors and always reflect a point of view. Newspaper reports are frequently incomplete, biased, and/or inaccurate.

For example, Argentinean newspapers covering the death of Eva Peron in 1952 explained it in many ways, none of them truthful, because the Peronist government and newspaper editors agreed that the phrase “ovarian cancer” was too sexual to be printed.



*La Nacion, July 26, 1952,
"The Wife of the Head of State Has Passed Away"*

Furthermore, newspaper coverage assumes that readers share knowledge about the circumstances of the event that historians decades later may or may not know. In the case of Eva Peron’s death, for example, reporters and editors at the time did not have to explain who Evita was, give the location of the cemetery, or provide details about local funeral practices. Anyone who bought a Buenos Aires newspaper at the time already knew that.

These problems do not mean that historians should avoid using details from newspapers. Rather, historians researching a particular event usually examine newspaper coverage from several different papers, and look most carefully at coverage by newspapers closest to where the event took place. They also check the details they take from newspaper stories against other types of documents. In the case of Evita’s demise, they might examine maps of Buenos Aires, the coroner’s report, and her husband’s memoirs.

Looking for Long-Term Trends

Another strategy is mining newspapers for evidence of long-term trends. Here we often look at more than just the newspaper stories. Classified advertisements, for example, can tell us about changes in prices of apartment rentals over time, or about the titles or salary ranges for various kinds of jobs. Display advertising can tell us how many new movie theaters are opening in a town or what kinds of food people are looking for in the supermarkets. Even long-running advice columns can give us this kind of evidence, showing changes over time in what people considered to be problems and what newspaper writers considered to be solutions for those problems.

This strategy can include skimming through a large group of newspapers looking for something on a particular topic—political demonstrations, floods, or outbreaks of measles, for instance—over a period of months, years, or decades. A historian taking this approach may decide not to read every page of every newspaper in the period that interests her, but to look at a random selection, like the second day of every month for 30 years or only the months of August and November for a decade.

Using newspapers in this way requires some previous sense of historical context since historians are reading in hopes of having “something jump out” at them. They must be able to quickly and efficiently recognize items that fit or contradict the pattern that concerns them. One good way for beginners to acquire such a background is to review a few textbooks dealing with the time and place they hope to study.

Search tools such as Lexis-Nexus and the headline index of the *New York Times* help a great deal with this second kind of research in newspapers. Unfortunately, indexing for the great majority of the world’s newspapers started in the 1990s, if they have any indices at all. Historians hoping to study earlier times and other parts of the world will still spend many hours looking through actual newspapers or scanning microfilm copies for some time to come.

Searching for Details

A third strategy is searching for the “texture” of an event. Details from other parts of the newspaper can help flesh out a newspaper story. Weather reports can tell us if it was raining on the day of the battle. Department-store advertising can suggest what people might have worn to vote on the day of the election. Movie reviews and television listings can tell us what stories people cared about in the month of an epidemic.

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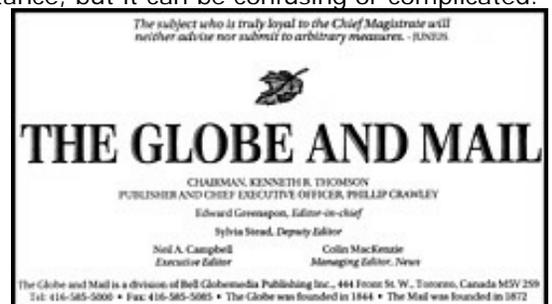
This simple question implies many others: When and where was the newspaper published? What kind of reader was it intended to reach? Did it have local competitors? What were its political affiliations?

Answers to some of these questions come from examining the newspaper carefully. Every front page is likely to tell us the location and date on which the paper was published, and sometimes the masthead on the front page also announces how long the newspaper has been in business.



Times of India masthead, October 22, 2004

In most present-day newspapers a small box called the *indica* can be found in the editorial page, which in turn is sometimes in the middle of the paper's first section, sometimes the paper's second page, and sometimes its last or second-to-last page. The *indica* lists the owners and managers of a newspaper. This information sometimes gives clues to its political stance, but it can be confusing or complicated. Newspapers' owners, editors, and sometimes other writers today express their views openly on an editorial page without any claim of objectivity or neutrality. But before 1900, newspapers did not often distinguish between editorial and news stories, and separate editorial pages were rare.



Globe and Mail indica, 2004

In the 1980s, for example, Nicaragua's most important newspaper, *La Prensa*, belonged to Violeta Chamorro, the head of a powerful Nicaraguan clan. One of her sons participated in the cabinet of Nicaragua's government; another led an armed rebellion against that government. So the publisher's last name did not provide a clue to which side of the Nicaraguan conflict the newspaper took, although it did suggest that the publisher, herself, might have political ambitions (she was elected president in 1990). Determining the paper's political stance required looking beyond the *indica* to the content of the newspaper's editorials.

Newspapers also distinguish themselves in political terms. Regular readers expect their newspaper to take consistent political positions (sometimes associated with particular political parties) while reporting on the events of the day. Although "journalistic objectivity" has been a shared goal of 20th- and 21st-century

journalists, its meaning has shifted across space and over time. In many cases it has meant “not making up facts” or “making the newspaper’s political position very clear” rather than trying to avoid bias. Today, in places where there is still more than one daily paper, like Mexico City, Buenos Aires, London, or New York City, readers usually understand where each paper sits on the local political spectrum.

While ordinary readers at the time a newspaper is being published usually have a clear sense of the paper’s politics, historians looking at old newspapers need to exercise caution when trying to decipher a newspaper’s political position. Sometimes the syndicated features express very different views than the rest of the paper. For instance, the U.S. comic strip “Little Orphan Annie” took an obvious and consistent right-wing position beginning in the 1930s with opposition to Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal and continuing for decades thereafter. But the cartoon was so popular that newspapers whose politics were generally centrist or even leftist sometimes carried it. Furthermore, a newspaper’s political position often changes over time. The *New York Post*, for example, shifted from the most liberal newspaper in New York in the 1950s to the most conservative newspaper in New York in the 1980s.

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Newspapers

Questions to Ask

Who read this newspaper and why?

Analyzing the way the newspaper looks and the rhetoric of the newspaper's stories—not what they say, but how they say it—will sometimes provide clues to the paper's intended audience. Is the paper sensationalistic, dryly factual, or somewhere in between? Do the vocabulary, typography, and layout of the paper require strong reading skills or could someone who was just learning to read extract facts and ideas from the newspaper too? Are there many ads, few, or none? Do they advertise luxury goods or offer discounts on daily necessities? The answers to all these questions will hint at who is likely to be reading the paper.

But here, too, it pays to be careful. What counts as “sensationalistic” or “dryly factual” changes over time. Prose changes too, so a passage that readers today might have trouble with could have been very simple for someone to decipher when it was first published a century ago. The look of newspapers also evolved, so that a page from the 1920s might seem jumbled and difficult to read now, but would have made perfect sense to a reader at the time.

Prices inflate surprisingly quickly, so something that looks like a bargain might have been expensive at the time. Furthermore, goods and services can change from being daily necessities to expensive rarities. Theater tickets, for instance, were ordinary purchases for most Parisians in the 1880s, but became luxuries for middle-class people by the 1930s. This change can happen in reverse: for instance, cars were once a rich man's toy in Canada, whereas now nearly every Canadian family owns at least one.



Kodak advertisement, 1900

The best way to avoid these misunderstandings is to compare different newspapers from the same place and time. Historians look for differences in advertisements, headlines, choice of stories, placement of stories within the paper, different positions expressed in editorials, and disagreements about what issues merit an editorial. They also look at changes in layout and typography. Identifying these trends and changes help clarify what each paper's politics were and who might have been reading which paper.

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Questions to Ask

What is the competitive environment?

By about 1920, almost every city and many small towns in the developed world had their own newspapers—at least in places that had a large enough population of people who could read and could afford the small daily expense of buying the paper. Ordinarily, advertisers covered most of the cost of printing and distributing newspapers. Many cities had competing newspapers, some published in the morning, some in the afternoon.

To attract readers in competitive markets, newspapers publishing in the same places tried to appear unique. Some aimed for high literary quality while others tried to catch the reader's eye with the loudest headlines and the most lurid graphics. Some tried to print information that appealed to specific local audiences, such as coverage of high-society parties, the passenger lists of arriving ocean liners, or especially extensive classified advertising. Others emphasized features from wire services including serialized fiction, recipes and other consumer information, and advice on relationships as well as the more familiar opinion pages, theater and movie reviews, and comic strips. A good funny page gave newspapers great appeal and helped build reader loyalty.



*New York Post front page,
November 13, 2004*

Historians examining a newspaper for the first time try to understand the competitive environment in which the paper existed, the paper's political point of view, and the choices editors made about what to include and omit from their newspapers. As with understanding the technological context of a newspaper, the easiest way to do this is by making comparisons among newspapers published in the same place and at the same time. In this case, historians will compare the contents of the papers rather than their appearance. They will look for differences in the length and placement of articles, in the

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SECCION COMICA DE "EL UNIVERSAL"

Manojo el Inquieto



El Universal (Mexico City) comics page, July 1924

cartoons and columns, in the editorials, and even in the advertisements.

Setting the newspaper in its appropriate technological context is also important. It helps historians sort out what was ordinary about the newspaper for its place and time from what was extraordinary or out of place. To do this, historians make comparisons among several different newspapers from the same date and among issues of the same newspapers. They compare the look of different newspapers from the same time and place—including their typography, illustrations, placement and style of advertisements, number of pages, and page sizes—to get a sense of the economic health and intended audience of the particular newspaper that interests them. They compare the look of different issues of the same newspaper (especially size of headlines and number of photographs or prints) to see if the editors believed that the events covered on the day that interests them were especially important or exciting. Historians also need to have a good sense of what sources the newspaper had for its information and how long the lag time would have been between the events and their appearance in the paper. Reporters' bylines or bylines from news agencies will help provide a sense of that.

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When historians examine a particular story in a newspaper, they also often examine other stories appearing in the paper on that day. Looking at a story in the context of the larger newspaper can offer clues to the importance the editors assigned to the story and to how appealing they believed the story would be to the newspapers' readers. For example, it is usually safe to assume that stories positioned "above the fold"—that is, in the top half of the front page of the paper—were assigned a much greater priority either because they made a point the editors of the paper wanted to emphasize, or because readers were more likely to want to read that story than others. If, however, the story in question appeared in the bottom left corner of Page 7, squeezed against the margin by a large advertisement, it is usually safe to assume that the editors assigned much less significance or potential appeal to that story.

For example, according to *The Washington Post*, during the months before the outbreak of the war in Iraq in 2003, the paper's editors buried stories questioning such things as the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, while placing stories featuring the Bush Administration's war plans on the front page. Editors at the *Post* subsequently described their decisions on story placement as "a mistake."

Positioning, however, is not everything. Just because a story appears on Page 12 rather than Page 1 does not mean that the editors do not believe it to be important. It is also possible that the story you are reading is the sixth or seventh installment in a long-running story that the editors assume their readers are already familiar with. Breaking news often finds its way onto the front page of a newspaper because it is *new*, not necessarily because it is deemed to be more important than another story.

For this reason, understanding how the story you are reading relates to the others in the paper often requires looking at not only one edition of the paper, but several days worth of newspapers before and after the story in question. Is what you are reading a continuing story? Is it the first appearance of a series of stories? Is it the end of a long investigation? Answers to these sorts of questions can only be found through reading more than the story in front of you.

Modern databases such as *ProQuest Historical Newspapers* are a wonderful tool for researchers, but have the disadvantage of serving up stories in isolation. They present stories as though they had no relationship to everything else in the paper on a given day. If you are using such a database, be aware that you are seeing only a one-story snapshot of a complex document that contained many stories, graphics and advertisements, all of which help you to understand what you are reading.

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Questions to Ask

What was left out of the story?

How can I find out more?

Historians often read a newspaper story and, because so much detail is missing, are left wondering what really happened. Because newspapers are almost always in business to make money, there is a tension between the amount of space allocated to news and the amount allocated to paid advertising. One result of this tension is an emphasis on brevity and compact writing. In modern journalistic practice, the most important facts appear in the first paragraph of a news story. The rest of the factual material is arranged in a general hierarchy of importance. This way, when editors have to shorten a story to make it fit on the page, they can simply trim paragraphs from the bottom of the story until it fits in the space available. If the story is written properly, the reader should not feel the loss of those final two or three paragraphs.

While this approach to writing makes it easier for the person arranging copy on the page, it also means that information is inevitably left out of a story. Reporters often lament how much of the information they gather in their reporting never makes it into print—and historians lament just as often about information that *seems* to be missing from the stories they read. Understanding *why* the information you might want is missing is important. Was it removed because the story was simply too long? Or was it removed (or never included) because it conflicted with the political stance of the newspaper or was deemed too controversial or titillating for the paper's readers?

Finding the answer to these questions requires some additional research, often in other newspapers of the day. Are there other papers with a different political slant and if so, do they cover the same story differently? Is the news you are interested in reported in different ways—in magazines, in government reports, or in memoirs? If so, how are the same events or issues described differently? It is important to use multiple sources if it seems to you that something is missing from the story you are reading.

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"Mexican Officials Kick On Women in Knickers, Do not allow Oklahoma Tourists to Enter Mexico in Plus Fours" *El Universal* ("English News Section"), Mexico City, 14 July 1924.



[Read Story](#)



[Newspaper](#)

This story appeared in the two-page daily English-language supplement to *El Universal*, Mexico City's most authoritative newspaper at the time. The English-language supplement usually printed news that *El Universal's* editors believed would interest English-speaking readers who lived in the city more or less permanently, rather than tourists. Therefore the English-language pages generally contained business news of interest to local representatives of foreign firms, a smattering of political news from Britain and the United States (usually translated from the main part of the paper), social notes detailing the comings and goings of businessmen, diplomats, and their families, and extensive coverage of tournaments and dances at Mexico City's elite country clubs. The supplement almost never printed stories about crime, tourism, or the day-to-day workings of government (neither in Mexico nor abroad.)

So this small story might catch a historian's eye because it was unlike the articles around it. As she examined it, she would ask a series of questions:

A. *Why did Mexico City's most important newspaper feature two daily pages in English?*

The foreign business and diplomatic community in Mexico City in the 1920s was not large enough to support a newspaper of its own. Even if every English-speaking household in the city had subscribed to *El Universal*, they would not have raised its circulation figures appreciably. Furthermore, most people living in Mexico City at the time did not read English. Including the English-language section could not have brought new readers to the paper, then.

The supplement was expensive to produce, both because it required hiring journalists, translators, and an editor fluent in English—as few newspapermen of the time in Mexico City were—and because the single largest fixed expense for a newspaper in Mexico at the time was the cost of paper. Adding even a single sheet daily to *El Universal* was a big investment. No other Mexico City newspaper paid for a section in English, but *El Universal* stuck with it for four decades. So why would *El Universal's* editors have decided to print a section of the paper in English every day?

The advertisements in *El Universal* provide one possible answer to this question. They peddled high-end goods—often, imported items ranging from tennis balls to automobiles. They did not aim to reach many readers, but focused on a small number of wealthy ones. This would include Mexico City's community of English-speaking resident foreigners, but also included the larger number of relatively conservative, wealthy Mexicans who would see the inclusion of an English-language section as a sign of the newspaper's politics. In the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution (during which the U.S. invaded Mexico and Pancho Villa's army invaded the U.S.), this gesture of affiliation with the United States and its representatives in Mexico suggested that *El Universal* did not entirely agree with the new, post-Revolutionary government's nationalist policies. This, in turn, would have hinted at a broader conservatism that wealthier Mexicans, presumably, would have appreciated. Advertisers in *El Universal*, therefore, found the presence of the English-language section a reassuring sign that they could reach a group of rich, powerful consumers.



El Universal advertisement, July 1924

All this, in turn, means that the English-language section of the paper was not primarily intended as a news source, but more as a way for the paper to sell itself to readers and advertisers who would expect to find serious news in the paper's main sections in Spanish.

B. Was this story important at the time?

No other Mexico City newspaper covered this story; nor did it appear in the Spanish-language part of *El Universal*. This suggests that newspaper editors thought the story unimportant, that it appeared in the English-language supplement of *El Universal* only as entertaining "filler." Just because this was a very minor piece of news in 1924, however, does not mean that the article lacks value as a historical source in the present day. Sometimes, placed in their proper context, short newspaper articles can serve as windows opening onto much larger historical vistas. The challenge is in deciding what the proper historical context might be.

C. How was this story related to other articles printed in the newspaper at roughly the same time?

The story of Mexican officials refusing entry to a group of women from the United States was not typical of *El Universal's* articles—neither those in the regular Spanish-language pages nor in the English-language supplement—in most respects. The paper did not ordinarily cover events at the border. Even if it did, the crossing between Matamorros and Brownsville was not an especially busy one and rarely warranted press attention. It was highly unusual for an article—even a short one—to report the deeds of consular officials so far from the capital. Similarly, tourism

rarely received media attention in 1920s Mexico.

The article, however, does fit neatly into a series of stories and images that seemed to fill the paper in the summer of 1924. There was a sudden rise of attention to women's fashion, particularly those fashions that came from abroad and seemed to make women look masculine. The major issue of the time was the length of women's hair, but other aspects of women's appearance also caused controversy.

Stories and images about the trend for masculine-looking women's attire sometimes appeared in the news—as when an Italian bishop announced, in April 1924, that short-haired women would not be offered communion in the churches of his parish, or in this article about women in “plus-fours” (short, baggy pants strapped tight just below the knee). More often, though, changing fashions appeared in newspaper advertisements (the image of a “modern,” cosmopolitan woman was used to sell everything from quack medicines to household appliances), in photographs depicting athletes, celebrities, and high-society functions, and in reviews of Italian, French, and U.S. silent movies about “flappers.”



From *El Universal*, July 1924, “The Flapper Wife”

People around the world took an interest in this new vogue, but in Mexico it seemed especially important because of the recent Revolution. Women taking up masculine-seeming fashions symbolized larger change in women's social roles and the opportunities available to women, which in turn was part of an even broader upheaval in social relationships caused by the Mexican Revolution. One of the reasons that this story from the border would catch a historian's eye, then, is that it shows a representative of Mexico's federal government opposing—rather than supporting—the new, “revolutionary” way in which some women were presenting themselves.

D. What was left out of the story? How can I find out more?

This newspaper article is so brief that it raises more questions than it answers. Historians might want to work on three such questions when analyzing this story. First, what was going on in Brownsville and Matamorros at the time? Second, who was that consular official? Third, who were those women from Oklahoma who wanted to cross into Mexico?

Looking in *El Universal* from the previous month begins to answer the first question. President Calles had visited the region and given a major speech that brought up, among other things, the issue of women's roles in reconstructing Mexico after the Revolution. But once again this raises further questions. How did people in the area—on both sides of the border—respond to this speech? Did they even pay attention to it? What else was going on there? A more complete answer to the first question would require checking periodicals other than *El Universal*, especially newspapers from Brownsville and Matamorros.

Researching the other two questions also requires moving beyond the pages of *El Universal*, and eventually beyond research in periodicals, although it seems likely

that local newspapers would tell more of the story than the newspaper from the faraway capital of Mexico. To get a sense of the area at the time, tourist guidebooks and contemporaneous maps are a fine starting point. If the incident recorded in *El Universal's* article became notorious in the place where it happened, it might have been remembered by local people in memoirs or oral histories. A visit to the historical societies and municipal archives of Brownsville and Matamorros would probably be productive. Documents of the federal government—especially consular records from both sides of the border—would also be a good place to search, both to tell more of the story and to find out a bit more about this particular Mexican Consul in Brownsville.

Finally, to find out more about the women who tried to get into Mexico while wearing pants will require making a guess about who they were, based on further evidence from local newspapers and from consular records. Perhaps they were trying to cross the border in breeches as a political gesture. If so, they may have represented an organization of some kind, perhaps a women's club. The records of that group would be in an Oklahoma archive. Or, as the conclusion of the article in *El Universal* seems to hint, they may have been prostitutes coming to work at one of the legal brothels (delicately referred to as "nightclubs") on the Mexican side of the border. These *bordellos* were regularly inspected, and prostitutes had to carry special licenses. Thus, they too produced many official documents in which these women might perhaps be found.

This case study shows two aspects of using newspapers as primary sources—the limits of what can be learned from a single newspaper story, and the infinite possibilities of looking at the newspaper as a whole.

The limits on what a single article can tell historians are clear. In order to understand what the article might mean—or even to see that it might be interesting in some way—historians have to begin by knowing something about the newspaper in which the article appeared. In order to analyze it, they have to look at related articles in the same newspaper, look at different periodicals, and then move on to other kinds of documents. For this case study, useful documents included several kinds of government records, old maps, and memoirs. Newspapers often give historians a good place to begin their work, but are very rarely sufficient, on their own, for serious historical study.

Doing research in newspapers is full of possibilities. In this case, by taking in a wide range of different periodicals and by looking not only at the news stories, but also advertisements, illustrations, movie reviews and other features, historians could spot a pattern: Mexicans in the mid-1920s seemed to be concerned with the issue of women who looked masculine. A single article might not tell a historian very much in itself, but locating many such items is one of the best ways to spot a broad cultural or social transformation.

In the end, like any primary source for historical research, newspapers offer us imperfect, but exciting, glimpses of the past.

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