A Publisher's History of American Magazines

———

Peter Hutchinson

Part 1: Language and Writing

Any comprehensive discussion of magazine publishing should begin with a few words on the subject of writing, and any discussion of writing requires mention of language itself. So we'll start at the beginning.

All primates communicate with varied sounds and gestures, but among them *Homo sapiens sapiens* is most capable of articulated speech, due to the shape and position of the larynx. This unique physiology permits full spoken language, which may date to the time when our species left its first traces in Africa, roughly 190,000 years ago. Obviously, language is a key enabling factor behind human ascendancy, and it's logical that the origins of both language and human dominance would coincide. Certainly, the globe-spanning migration of humans that began approximately 50,000 years ago was enabled by—if not a consequence of—rich use of language. (Perlman)

Have species other than our own used language? *Homo erectus* ranged as far north as France and as far east as central China, using fire and leaving behind well-made tools and weapons from 1.7 million to 400,000 years ago. This suggests the ability to plan, coordinate, and execute as a group.

Chimpanzees and other primates can learn sign language and seem to be capable of remarkable expression, including humor and abstraction, at least according to their human teachers. (Pinker)

It's not impossible that our cousins the Neanderthals used spoken communication. They coexisted with modern *Homo sapiens sapiens* and shared a similar physiology. Although some scientests contend that the shape of the Neanderthal throat would have limited their ability to articulate, Neanderthals left evidence of burial ceremonies, of care for one another, and advanced tool-making—all suggestive of the ability to communicate. (Dawkins, 68)

Nonetheless, the eventual dominance of *Homo sapiens sapiens* appears driven in large part by greater ability to use structured, spoken language. We evolved to become better speakers, and this makes language and the urge to communicate part of our genetic inheritance—part of what makes us human.

Linguists like Noam Chomsky and Steven Pinker tell us that our brains as well as our throats are adapted to learning language—that children possess an innate understanding of grammar, a "language instinct" before they begin to speak. (Pinker)

Some linguists believe there was a single proto-language from which all subsequent languages arose and evolved. Others believe that language had polygenetic origins ; that is, that language evolved independently in multiple locations. In 1866 the Society of Linguistics in Paris prohibited speculation on the orgin of language. The question was thought unanswerable. (Dawkins, 68)

One fact is certain: language changes rapidly, dramatically, and often unpredictably. Even when used by a relatively stable, homogenous culture, language evolves briskly, shifting quite a bit in a relatively short time—as English-speaking students discover when they first encounter Shakespeare or Chaucer… or Henry James, for that matter. [1]

[1] Naturally, this has been widely known for centuries. Johnson wrote, "When we see men grow old and die at a certain time one after another, from century to century, we laugh at the elixir that promises to prolong life to a thousand years ; and with equal justice may the lexicographer be derided, who being able to produce no example of a nation that has preserved their words and phrases from mutability, shall imagine that his dictionary can embalm his language, and secure it from corruption and decay, that it is in his power to change sublunary nature, or clear the world at once from folly, vanity, and affectation." [Samuel Johnson: Preface, *Dictionary of the English Language ;* 1755]

Change in language reflects the drive to communicate that all humans share, a drive that transcends language barriers. When cultures speaking two different languages meet, pidgins form. These are "shorthand" languages that allow rudimentary communication between speakers of different languages. When pidgins are learned as native languages, they become creoles: new languages which grow, gaining nuance and structure, evolving themselves as their parent languages did.

In "Professor at the Breakfast Table" (1860) Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "Every language is a temple, in which the soul of those who speak it is enshrined," and Ezra Pound said, "The sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one language, and no single language is capable of expressing all forms and degrees of human comprehension."

Thus language change demonstrates the fundamental, unceasing vitality of human communication…the urgency to share and exchange knowledge that's as much a part of our nature as language itself.

Just as the beginning of human dominance over other species corresponded with the emergence of language, the emergence of writing corresponded with the dawn of civilization in the literal sense ; that is, life in cities. Urbanization—with commerce, taxes, government, laws, bureaucracies, and so on—is apparently the sine qua non for writing. Although writing developed coincidentally with urbanization in many locations, including Central America, Egypt, Pakistan, and China, the oldest surviving written records, from approximately 3,800 BC, are clay tablets from Sumer in the Middle East.

Let's look more closely at these 5,000 year-old clay tablets from Sumer. What ancient secrets do these writings from the days of Abraham preserve?

Nothing too exciting, unfortunately. Most surviving tablets are pretty mundane. They record accounts, laws, budgets, and IOUs—the boring business of day-to-day life. A fairly typical tablet says, "One lamb from Abba Shaga, Beli-tab received, the month of the eating Shesda. The year when the high priestess of the god Nanna of Karzida was installed." In other words, a receipt.

The records of ancient civilization are every bit as dull as the records of daily commerce that litter our own offices today. It's not only world-changing events that must be written down and stored for posterity. It's the little things, too, that need to be recorded and filed, for the taxman and the boss… receipts for donations, for example.

Interestingly, the early Middle Eastern civilizations that developed writing also discovered several other processes that we still use to produce and preserve information.

Assyrian clay tablets dating from the eighth century BC were stored in clay envelopes stamped with a short title, analogous to book covers.

Many tablets were "signed" with a seal, a small cylinder with raised symbols on its surface which identified the scribe. As the cylinder was rolled across damp clay, the symbols pressed into the tablet, imprinting themselves like footprints. On Abba Shaga's tablet mentioned above, the seal reads, "Shulgi, the mighty man, king of Ur, the king of the four parts, Beli-tab, the scribe."

The principle of imprinting using a rolling cylinder, discovered at the outset of civilization, continues to be employed successfully in modern printing presses.

By the way, there's compelling evidence that printing using cylinder seals developed independently in multiple locations. What may be the oldest surviving cache of writing in the Western hemisphere includes a glyph-bearing ceramic cylinder discovered near La Venta in southwestern Mexico, the royal center of the Olmec people, predecessors of the Aztecs and Mayans. The cylinder dates from about 650 BC, and was probably inked and rolled across skin or cloth to leave an image. Researchers believe that the cylinder, like the one used by Beli-tab the scribe, contains the name of a king. (Olmec)

The medium of clay has many advantages, not least of which is permanence. It has drawbacks, too, which are easy to identify. Clay is heavy, cumbersome to store, and not well suited to extended writing. As history progressed, a variety of other media have been used to carry and store the written word.

In ancient Egypt a marsh reed known as *Cyperous papyrus* was used to make a thin, flexible mat. The stalk of the reed was cut into thin strips, which were laid at right angles, pounded flat, and dried in the sun. The resulting sheet was light and receptive to ink, and was used by the Greeks and Romans as well as the Egyptians. Papyrus isn't as durable as clay (although quite a bit survives), but it was a big step forward in terms of portability and storage, espcially when rolled in scrolls.

The name of the papyrus plant gave us our word *paper,* but papyrus is just one of many plants that can be used to make a medium for writing. Types of mulberry, fig, and daphne have similar qualities. Different methods of using plants to make a paper-like writing material were developed independently in different cultures, in America and Asia as well as Europe. An ancient technique still practiced in the Himalayas—forming pulp on a screen in a wet mold—may have been adapted to make the first rag paper. (CEPI)

Rags were first substitiuted for plants approximately 1,900 years ago in China, in a process reportedly developed by an inventor named Ts'ai Lun, who was ennobled for his achievement.[2] Papermaking spread slowsly westward to India and the Arab lands, reaching Europe during the Middle Ages, in approximately 1200 AD. It was the Arabs who developed the practice of coating paper with a starch paste to make it smooth, endowing future generations of magazine readers with glossy paper. (CEPI ; McMurtrie, 61)

Various kinds of leather have also been used as a writing surface throughout the centuries. One enduring form was developed approximately 2,200 years ago in the Middle East—according to tradition, in the city of Pergamum, whose name became corrupted into the name of the material, *parchment.* (Chappell, 3)

Parchment is made from animal skins, usually sheep, calves, or goats. The Latin word for fleece or sheepskin, *vellum,* was used to describe the highest grade of parchment (from the skin of young animals), and in the Middle Ages *vellum* came to mean parchment used in manuscripts. Parchment is extremely durable, and is still used on occasion, for important documents like diplomas.

Clearly, a document written in ink on a material like papyrus or parchment was intended to be a permanent record. To record information that didn't need to last permanently, such as notes or drafts, ancient Mediterranean cultures used wax tablets backed and framed with wood. Text was scratched into the wax with a stylus, and could be "erased" by heating and smoothing the wax.

[2] The ancient Chinese also wrote on strips of bamboo, linked together with silk threads to form scrolls, Each strip held one line of writing. When ancient scrolls are discovered, the silk has usually disintegrated after centuries of storgage, leaving a game of pick-up sticks for scholars who attempt to reconstruct the writing. Imagine reassembling "Paradise Lost" one line at a time!

Sometimes two of these tablets were hinged together, like a diptych or folding photograph frame. The two wax writing surfaces would be exposed when opened and protected when closed, in the manner of a book. Historian Douglas McMurtrie (534) reported that one of these diptychs found at Pompeii (recording a financial transaction) is dated 55 AD, making it the the oldest preserved Latin manuscript.

Scrolls were generally written in columns, with the writing running parallel to the length of the scroll. If a scroll was folded accordion style, the result would be what we call today a signature, with pages of text from the front of the scroll facing each other and blank pages facing one another on the back. When the blank pages were pasted together and the signature was sewn along one side, the result was a booklet that was easier to use for reference purposes than the original scroll. (McMurtrie, 534)

About 2,000 years ago, the Romans began to use this system to bind legal documents, and this, of course, was the origin of bookbinding in West. The Romans referred to this format as a *codex,* and because they were originally used to store written laws, *codes* and *codicils* are rules or legal agreements today.

Eventually this format became dominant, and bookbinding was further developed and refined during the early Middle Ages. Books were made by folding large sheets of vellum into smaller pages, attaching multiple folded sheets together along the folded edge with thread or cord, and enclosing the pages in protective covers. The process of binding books by sewing folded sheets is still used today, an "information technology" that has endured for 2,000 years.

During the early Middle Ages in Europe literacy was uncommon, and reading and writing were taught, and therefore controlled, largely by the church. It's from church scribes—monks—that we have inherited many of the enhancements to the writing process taken for granted today, including punctuation and proofreaders' marks… as well as some of the most beautiful calligraphy and illustration ever produced.

Illuminated, hand-written manuscripts are painstakingly difficult to create, and one of the reasons why the church was the center of reading and writing was the amount of labor required to produce a single book: in many cases, years of effort on the part of numerous scribes and artists. This labor was cost-free to the church.

During the 14th and 15th centuries literacy rates began to rise, due to the growth of commercialism and the beginnings of a middle class. Although education remained under the church's control, merchants, scholars, and other private individuals who wanted a written document like a book or ledger turned to commercial scribes, or scriveners, who became increasingly common in towns and cities in the late Middle Ages. By the 15th century, scribes had formed guilds like many other craftsmen, and represented an established and powerful monopoly.

This monopoly was shaken by the revolution which began midway through the 15th century—the *real* information revolution. No technology developed before or since has had as much impact on society as the developments of Johann Gensfleisch Zur Laden Zum Gutenberg, a German metalsmith.