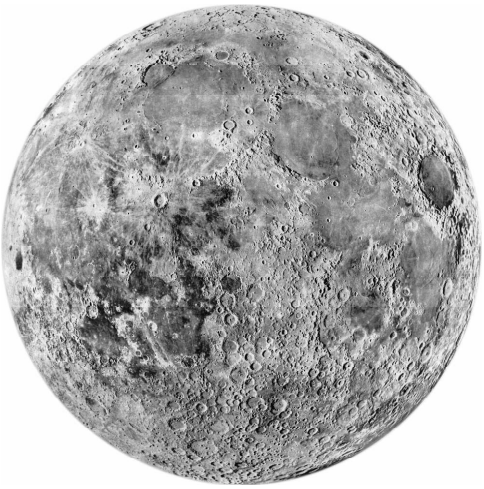
And pray that there's intelligent life somewhere up in space...
...'cause there's bugger-all down here on Earth.
~Eric Idle

I think the surest sign that there is intelligent life out there
in the universe is that none of it has tried to contact us.
~Calvin and Hobbes



In Defense of Vespertilio-homo: Finding the Truth in the 1835 Moon Hoax

By James Eric Black-Georgia State University

What could have been the greatest news story of all time began without flourish in a three-column story on the first page of the *New York Sun* August 25, 1835. Newspapers across the nation reprinted a series of articles titled "Great Astronomical Discoveries." A casual reader could have thought the story would be about Halley's Comet. That was one of the reasons why the well-known astronomer Sir John Herschell traveled to the Cape of Good Hope in Southern Africa with his famous telescope. Scientists knew that the famous comet would grace the skies sometime that year, but they did not know exactly when it would be. According the *Sun,* Herschell found far more than a comet through the lens of his telescope. He was the first to discover creatures, including winged humanoids he called *Vespertilio-homo*, living on the moon. Before long religious leaders and university scholars all over the world were discussing the possibilities and ramifications of hairy bat-like moon people who could build temples and canals on the world's nearest satellite.

Historians note that the series of articles, later deemed "the moon hoax" by competing newspapers, was a shining example of how readers of the early penny press wanted entertainment as much as information from their newspapers (Bjork 128). This argument assumes the stories were mere entertainment features. The moon hoax was not the only time such a joke would be perpetrated. Since a tolerance for hoaxes has declined as the ethics of reporting advanced, it is important to place the moon hoax in its rightful place historically. More than just entertainment, the moon hoax was an example of a more serious discourse between rivaling factions of society, each in its own way searching for truth or profit. The commingling of fact and fiction exposed journalistic

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jealousies between competing newspapers and their ideas of objective reporting, as well as how audiences blindly believed their science and religious leaders.

Even though the fictional aspects of the moon hoax are obvious, the verification of facts is highlighted during almost every turn of events. The writer of the moon hoax attempted to present a satirical analysis of religious sermons and scientific studies that was already anticipated lunar life. The success of the hoax depended on the vulnerability of the reading audience who by this time began to expect a dose of fantasy with factual information from their news medium. For over a month, the *Sun* and its rival, the *New York Herald*, debated the sincerity of the moon hoax, both claiming to have the facts concerning the writing of the story. More than anything else, this paper seeks to discover the truth behind the moon hoax, not the facts of the story itself, but the effect the series may have had on the concept of news. This paper argues that it took a work of fiction for journalists to begin to understand the necessity of objective factual reporting. The moon hoax became the catalyst for the discussion of what readers expected and needed from their news media in a time when objectivity was just a concept.

Moon Hoax Synopsis

The year 1835 was a vitally important time in both New York and U.S. history. Emotions concerning the slave issue disrupted daily life for many who lived in the city in mid-August. Fiery speeches and torchlight parades were commonplace. During the summer, the Postal Campaign of the American Anti-Slavery Society attempted to forcefully prevent the distribution of proslavery newspapers in the city (Thorton 90). Indeed, the closest publisher and editor Benjamin Day ever came to admitting the moon hoax was a fraud was on September 16, 1835 when he wrote in a *Sun* editorial that

whether the moon hoax could be proved true or false did not matter since the moon stories "had a useful effect in diverting the public mind for a while from the bitter apple of discord; the abolition of slavery" (as noted in MacDougall, 2).

1835 saw the cusp of a major turning point in the development of the American press as well. Two years earlier, Day successfully saved his failing *Sun* by dropping the price by a nickel. Day revolutionized the newspaper medium in America by producing inexpensive information directed at the working class (Shudson 58). This new news was only just beginning to be tested in the marketplace. It was in the midst of all of the turmoil of the day that the moon hoax made its premiere.

The first of the six moon hoax installments appeared Tuesday, August 25, 1835 over three of the four columns of the *Sun's* front page, and was attributed to a little known Scottish scientific journal that had actually temporarily ceased publication two years earlier (Evens 196):

GREAT ASTRONOMICAL DISCOVERIES
Lately made by
SIR JOHN HERSCHEL L.L.D, F.R.S, etc.
At the Cape of Good Hope
(From the Supplement to the Edinburgh Journal of Science)

One can only speculate whether the 25-year-old publisher of the *Sun* was in on the joke from the beginning, but it is safe to say Day had every intention of leaving his readers with no doubt on its veracity. This first issue included an unsigned note:

> Great Astronomical Discoveries—We this morning commence the publication of a series of extracts from the new supplement to the Edinburgh Journal of Science, which have been very politely furnished us by a medical gentleman immediately from Scotland, in consequence of a paragraph which appeared on Friday last from *The Edinburgh Courant* … We are necessarily compelled to omit the more

> abstruse and mathematical parts of the extracts … but even the latter cannot fail to excite more ardent curiosity and afford more sublime gratification than could be created and supplied by anything short of divine revelation from heaven. Now indeed it may be said that we live in an age of discovery (Locke *Moon Hoax*, 7).

This introduction, presumably by Day, is important because it sets up the series as factual scientific data. The first installment told the tale of how Sir John discovered how to increase the focus of his famous telescope by transfusing an artificial light, such as that found in a microscope, onto the lens of the telescope. Basically, the image on the telescopic lens was treated as a real image and then magnified by projection on to a screen. This allowed the scientist to map mountains and oceans on the moon and to speculate on the locations of wildlife, "proving" the theories other scientists had already prophesized (Locke 7).

The affects on circulation were immediate. By mid-afternoon, not a copy of the paper could be bought in the city at any price. An additional 10,000 free enlarged special editions were distributed (Griggs).[1] The tale continued in five more installments on succeeding days. By using the imaginary scientific principle, Sir John was able to see grassy areas, mountains and eventually quadrupeds such as buffalo, antelope and sheep. By changing lenses, Herschel could clearly see tailless beavers that lived in elaborate huts

[1] Newspapers at the time often would reprint stories from other publications, often without attribution. In true penny press form, which will be elaborated later in this paper, the introduction of the 1853 reprint of the moon hoax in book form may have been condensed and reprinted in newspapers across the country. For example, a story written in first person appeared in the *Hinds County Gazette* in Mississippi with no acknowledgement February 9, 1853 under the heading of "Miscellaneous" (*The Hinds County Gazette*, Raymond MS, February 09, 1853; Issue 35; col B). This author was unable to locate an original edition of the 1852 book, but operates on the hypothesis that they are indeed one and the same since other sources have quoted the original Griggs introduction in ways that are extremely similar to the story in the *Hinds County Gazette*. This story will be attributed simply as "Griggs" since the article appeared in a four-page newspaper that did not number its pages.

and had the ability to make fire. By the end of the week, Sir John discovered bat-like people, who he immediately named "*Vespertilio-homo*," and temples built around the volcanoes (Locke 23).

By the end of the series, regular circulation had almost doubled, much to the chagrin of Day's competition. Some who did not have the extraordinary news apologized to their readers. One said it, too, had received the "Supplement" in the mail, but had been obliged to omit it on account of "pressure of other matters." Others spoke as if Sir Herschel had immortalized himself on the pages of history (Griggs). The *New York Times* praised the series for the accuracy of its scientific content. The more conservative *Philadelphia Inquirer* left its readers to decide concerning the accuracy of the tale but conceded the credentials of the author and the intense interest of the subject (Menzel 107).

Historiography Method and Justification of Study

The most fruitful studies of the moon hoax have been conducted outside the journalism academe in social histories and science studies. For example, in an article that spanned two issues of *Sky and Telescope* magazine in 1981, David S. Evans separated fact from fiction in the moon hoax articles. He carefully explained the science behind the fraud, specifically the optical problems of the projection of images and the size and weight of the lens (Evans 196-199). The truth to the moon hoax lies somewhere else for the media historian. Journalist scholars have been slow to determine what the moon hoax actually meant to their profession. For at least a hundred years, the "moon-hoax" was

synonymous with fraud and sensationalism,[2] but may have actually started the discussion journalism ethics. At the vary least, the moon hoax, the first non-political or war-based newspaper sensation in American media history (Bjork 128), offers a representative anecdote of published commentary about the meaning of truth in journalism and the concept of objectivity.

Objectivity is also at the center of the conflict between historiographers and historians—the culture war between those who see history as objective and those who see it as a telling of stories. Athanasios Moulakis argues that the perfect historiography is the death of living history.

> "Those who bemoan that our children are no longer taught history are not generally worried about the students' capacity to sift historical evidence," he argues, "They want their young to be elevated by exposure to edifying and cautionary tales woven into their national identity. Second-guessing a formative cultural legacy is considered subversive" (Moulakis 40).

For Maulakis, historiography is history written by philosophers after the warts have been removed. Christopher Kent claims historians distrust historiographies because they are vaguely parasitical. "As literary criticism is to literature, so is historiography to history: 'doing it' is surely superior to writing about how it is done." Moulakis believes "real historians" achieve their craft in archives whereas historiographers feed on the primary sources of others. Kent continues by noting that historiography's dubious reputation with historians may stem from the promotion of self-consciousness, a characteristic he claims historians view with suspicion as opening the door to subjectivity and preoccupations with ontological and epistemological matters (Kent 386).

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[2] For example see *The Hawaiian Gazette* 04 Nov. 1898; *The Charleston Mercury* 24 Aug. 1859; *The North American* 31 May 1893; *New Hampshire Statesman* 19 Mar. 1859; *The New York Herald* 24 June 1836; *Morning Oregonian* 19 Aug. 1894; *The Indiana State Journal* 02 Sept. 1896

Keith Jenkins, however, argues in his groundbreaking book "*What is History?"* that by now we should have learned that there are "no such things as neutral/objective interpretations, as innocent surveys, as unpositioned positions …" (Jenkins 13). For Jenkins, objective history is unrealistic. This is especially true for a media historiography since much of the research depends on the stories told by others, whether in primary sources or in interpretations. Furthermore, Peter Burke argues that history is a cultural construction subject to variations over time (Burke, 3). We can better understand historical significance as more data is revealed. Historiographies do not try to leave out or whitewash. They simply recognize that history is always a story told from a particular perspective.

The conservatives in the culture wars assume historiographers are working to sanitize history. Historiography is really more about understanding historical subjectivity. Historiography places the reader in the story, recounting a narrative so that readers will better understand the culture that produced it. The point of departure for this essay is not to accomplish a purely objective account of what transpired, but to unravel and make sense of the story. It is less a search for truth than a search for understanding about media culture. It is a hermeneutic project concerning stories and their meanings.

As for this essay, Walsh argues that a study of scientific hoaxes is a social project that expands beyond the physical text to enlist an author's intention and readers' knowledge about genres and culture, and requires a new methodology that takes into consideration a cycle of interactions among author, texts, the medium of transmission and the reading community. This expansive focus is crucial to understanding how media affects culture over time (Kaufer and Carley 2 as mentioned in Walsh, 3). Using Walsh's

methodology, this paper is a focused historiography case study of the 1835 moon hoax. Using both contemporary discussion and primary sources newly preserved in Internet archival sources, this paper attempts to re-evaluate expectations that newspaper readers in 1835 may have had concerning the objectivity of unbiased news in the relatively new penny press. Documents can provide material for a thorough examination of the way in which a particular kind of knowledge such as science or religion is formed, and acts in relation to institutions and the roles prescribed in them (Foucault xi). The same can be said about the study of the moon hoax and its relationship to objective journalism. We can better understand today's ethics, or lack thereof, by studying how the ethics of American journalism were formed.

Moon Hoax Literature Review

Before the year 2000, the moon hoax had only been subjected not as journalism, but to a textual analysis and non-analytical historical reviews. The hoax was inspired, if not written, by Richard Adams Locke[3] in the summer of 1835, an Oxford educated journeyman hired by publisher Benjamin Day to be a police reporter, but was scientific editor by the time of the hoax. The first attempt to elevate the *Sun* articles to a more literary level may have come in the 1852 book reprint of the original articles from 1835. In 1975 Ormond Seavey wrote a new introduction to a photographic reprint and quotes several passages from the original introduction written by William N. Griggs, a reporter for the *Sun* during the time of the moon hoax. Seavey fails to mention that the 1852 introduction also claimed a satirical intention of the writer. Griggs contends that the moon hoax was more than mere jest, but was intended as a satire on the religious writings

[3] It has also been ascribed on insufficient evidence to Joseph Nicollet. Cf. Dict. Amer. Biog.; F. M. O'Brien, *The story of the* Sun, 1918, p. 64-102

of Dr. Thomas Dick. "The doctrines of this school," according to Griggs, "prepared the public mind for giving a momentary credence to the wonderful discoveries related to this admirably concocted hoax." Griggs claims the hoax was written to poke fun at the unwarranted and extravagant anticipation of discovering people on the moon first made by German astronomers and later aggravated in Dick's "religio-scientific rhapsodies" (Griggs, as quoted Crowe 429). No matter what Locke's original intentions for the story may have been, Benjamin Day successfully played the story out not as satire, but as a revenue-generating hoax.

Henry B. Wonham ties the hoax to another purely American form of writing. Many writers in the 1830s, including journalists such as Edgar Allen Poe, tried to transform the tall tale to a written form. Newspapers editors such as the *New Orleans Picayune* and the short lived *New York Constellation* provided early outlets for what was still known in the 1830s as backwoods humor. The literary magazine *Spirit of the Times* often would pick up other backwoods humor pieces from such diverse newspapers as the *St. Louis Reveille*, the *Louisville Journal*, and the *New Orleans Delta* (Wonham 298). The true challenge was to transfer the story to print without removing it from a context of a live performance. Mark Twain, who was born three months after the moon hoax, referred to this problem as "an attempt to use a boat on land or a wagon on water" (Clemens, 504).

Seavey claims that usually "both the deadpan teller of the tale and his impassive listener [are] conspirators against reality" (Locke *Moon Hoax* xxiii). This conspiracy aspect implies the tall tale or satire is a joint activity between teller and listener designed to entertain and distract both of them from daily worries (Walsh 24). The trappings of

plausibility surround the narrative to highlight the ingenuity of the teller's departure from fact. For the sake of humor, the listener must accept the spirit in which the story is being told. The tall narrative reinforces or establishes group identity based on shared specialized knowledge (Brown 33). An important question raised concerning the Wonham study is at what point American readers became discerning enough to recognize when a tall tale was expected and when it was not.

The *Sun*, as well as most other newspapers of the day, provided space for literary experimentation and entertainment as well as the dissemination of facts. News items often turned to pure invention. Although "human interest stories" was not a term used at the time, penny papers often printed a version of this type of story that concentrated more on keeping the interest of the reader than on reality. Karen Roggenkamp argues that the 1830s readers recognized and delighted in the interplay between fact and fiction, story telling and news briefing. The question of actuality was part of the appeal to the penny paper readers. Roggenkamp claims that fabrication of news events was a game between readers, editors and writers. The editors understood that the readers would both figuratively and literally buy a spectacular story, preferably one that unfolded slowly, with a germ of plausibility and excitement substituted for any amount of fact. Regular news coverage, let alone the occasional hoax, created a community of readers who joined the competition against the editors in the thrill of choosing to believe or not (Roggenkamp 4-5)

If indeed the moon hoax was a tall tale, then what does this say about its audience? Tall tales can be used against unsuspecting strangers as a means of emphasizing exclusive membership to a folk group or for initiation. Such initiation

occurs when the intended victim rises to the occasion by understanding the rhetorical game being played (Wonham 288-289). In 1942, Frank Luther Mott argued that there is a fine line between the journalistic hoax and the journalistic fake. The distinction does not depend on any form of objective criteria or the intention of the writer, but more on the reception of the reader. A hoax that fools everyone is a fake news story and thus reprehensible from the point of view of journalism ethics (Mott 46). Mott does not take into consideration that the author of the story may have had nothing but pure intentions. Ultimately, it is the publisher that makes the decisions on how a story will be promoted. What may have started out as a satire or a tall tale can be spun into a hoax if a publisher sees the economic potential to do so.

Henry Wonham claims that the hoax is a close cousin of the tall tale, but it remains a variant because in terms of rhetorical effect the two forms could not be more different. He defines a hoax not as an intention but as a repercussion of the writing. The hoax treats its entire audience in the same way that the tall tale treats only its naïve victim by concealing its fictional nature behind a realistic presentation. The narrator and at least a segment of the audience must share a tacit awareness in order to produce a tall tale (Wonham 295). Tall tales are the oral forerunner of the media hoax. Both play on the existence or witness of a remarkable occurrence and that the judgment and knowledge of the audience separates insiders from impressionable outsiders.

Literature Review on Truth and Objectivity Surrounding the Moon Hoax

Many journalistic histories have noted the fictional aspects of the moon hoax (for example Bjork 128; Stickley; Wonham 295), but the moon hoax has been treated as little

more than an anomaly that occurred at the beginning of the penny press era (for example Buchholz 123-143; Folkerts and Teeter 119-144; Fellow 87-108; Stephens 178-194). Most moon hoax treatments in books and academic articles are anecdotal at best. The significance of scientific media hoaxes, specifically the 1835 moon hoax, remained almost entirely unstudied by communication, rhetorical or journalistic academic journals until the 21st century.

In her Ph.D. dissertation, Walsh argues that the reasons for the lack of scholarly respect could be that media hoaxes have suffered from an association with mass culture, which was, at least until the 1960s, considered beneath the dignity of literary study. Journalism and communication departments were concerned with the historical nature of the news, but dismissed scientific hoaxes as comical and an unfortunate epiphenomenon of the penny press and yellow journalism. Walsh claims that even more problematic for a study of hoaxes is that no one offered a working definition of what a hoax was. In daily use, the word "hoax can describe any situation in which someone has intentionally fooled a public into believing something" (Walsh, 7). An intentional fallacy causes problematic associations for rhetoricians. Walsh's premise is that the media hoax represented a new rhetorical genre that could only blossom in the Industrial Age. To achieve its effect on readers, the media hoax required certain structures of material and social culture that finally snapped into alignment in the early 1830s when mass production of newspapers became a reality (26). The moon hoax, along with other scientific hoaxes to which Walsh writes, drew readers into admitting the foolishness of blindly believing anything stamped with the imprimatur of "science, and at the same time indirectly critiqued and mimicked the scientists" (33).

Copeland, however, simply chalks up the believability of the moon hoax to a series of fortunate events. He argues that Americans of this period processed a fascination with knowledge that grew from Enlightenment thought. Halley's Comet was expected to return in late 1835 after an absence of seventy-seven years, making the discussion of astronomy and the heavenly bodies more prominent in society. Many newspapers for a century leading up to the moon hoax published stories about the heavens and specifically the moon. Furthermore, a religious revival that began in the early 1800s was at a peak, forcing a debate between religion and science (Copeland, 141). The idea of religion and science is important to this study in that both represent a search for some kind of truth outside the realm of the journalism that may have also influence the idea of truth in the penny press since religious and science stories were often reprinted.

Schudson asserts that the birth of objective news reporting was in the Jacksonian age—1828-1836, about the same time the "idea of news" itself was invented (Schudson, 44, 56, 16). It was time when many newspapers were severing their ties to political parties, which in turn created an ethic of nonpartisanship. Furthermore, New York City was experiencing a time of unrest marked by frequent violent acts between the merchants and artisan workers. Schiller (10,17) suggests that the most ingenious and fundamental contribution of the penny press may have been in the way it appeared to speak to both of these middle class groups at the same time. The *Sun*'s motto "It Shines for All" is an attempt to appeal to the many different social and economic groups.

Brian Thornton was the first to focus a mass media study on the discussion of the journalistic environment and desire for truth in the news that followed the moon hoax. He analyzed a handful of editorials and a single letter published about the moon hoax, as

well as all editorials and letters to the editor that discussed journalism ethics over a five month period after the moon hoax in the *Evening Post*, *The Herald*, the combined *Morning Courier & Enquirer* and the *Sun*. He found that two-thirds of the letters about journalism in 1835 expressed worries about whether readers were being told the truth or not (Thornton 95). Truth is the main theme by a large majority, but Thornton fails to explain exactly what he meant by the meaning of "truth." The failure to produce this definition is important in order to put the letters and editorials in context.

Leading Themes, Numbers, and Percentage: August 1 to December 31, 1835

Themes	Journalism Letters	Percentage of Letters Addressing Theme
Truth	48	66
Moral Force	24	33
Public Service	21	29
Fairness	19	26
Free Press	14	19
Political nonpartisanship	13	18
Objectivity	12	16
Sensationalism	7	10
Trust	2	3
Privacy	1	1

(Thornton 95)

In today's society, journalists seek to develop techniques for assembling information that has a high *probability* of being true. According to Black and his co-writers, the journalist must "work with society in an ongoing process to produce what will turn out to be Truth—truth with a capital T" (Black et al, 36). The Truth that Thornton seems to be advocating is thus not the sole responsibility of the journalist, but requires a pluralistic mindset that would tend to assure that Truth is indeed discoverable. Truth, with a capital T, requires sifting and sorting over time in order that some form of Truth becomes clear or that the readers have the tools they need to decided their own personal truth. A closer examination of this table reveals that although Thornton chose

only to discuss "truth" in the rest of his paper, his other themes may add more meaning to his subject. Ignoring the fact that Thornton decided to include in his study of the ethics of the moon hoax about a month of letters that had to have been written before the hoax even took place, most of his themes can be condensed into one: objectivity.

The power of the moon hoax was in the authoritative way it was written. Michael Shudson, in his classic *Discovering the News,* said, "Journalists came to believe in objectivity, the extent that they did, because they wanted to, needed to, were forced by ordinary human aspirations to seek escape from their own deep convictions of doubt and drift" (Shudson 4). By referencing a scientific journal, the author of the moon hoax borrowed the credibility of the scientific community. Schiller notes in passing that the moon hoax stories were reinforced by continual references to various forms of professional authority such as the fictitious scientific journal and repeated reference to the British Royal Society, to which Herschel had reputedly sent a copy of his full report. The *Sun* stories claimed the article is quoted from Herschel's longtime colleague, Dr. Andrew Grant, the "superintendent" of the telescope. The articles also refer to densely scientific footnotes and illustrations that were in the so-called original journal article, doubtlessly effective creating the illusion of objective truth (as noted in Schiller 79).

Attribution reinforced the validity of the work and borrowed the credibility of the scientific institutions and people. Schiller argues that akin to the most formal science of the mid-nineteenth century, newspapers also came to accept the notion of an objective universe as the very core of its endeavor (79). Although Thornton chooses not to discuss objectivity in his article, his primary sources point in this direction. With the exceptions

of privacy and sensationalism, all of the other themes point to a desire for objective truth in the media.

Fairness, free press, political nonpartisanship, trust and certainly objectivity are all words associated with the current goals of journalism, what *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward calls "the best obtainable version of the truth" (as noted in Missouri Group 9). Objectivity is a way of applying the methods of science to the art of journalism. Those methods not only include observable facts, but also the methods in which those facts are found and presented. In science, transparency means the researcher explains his or her objectives, methods, findings and limitations (Missouri Group 12). Truth, fairness, free press, political nonpartisanship, as well as detachment and balance are all venerable claims that did not define journalism until well after the moon hoax, possibly as late at the early 20th century (Mindich 11). Three months before the moon hoax, James Gordon Bennett announced his intention to "record the facts on every public and proper subject, stripped of verbiage and coloring" (*Herald* 6 May 1835). What Thornton may have also uncovered was that the moon hoax turned out to be the catalyst in which the concept of objectivity in the news media was finally being debated. It would then take time for the idea that newspapers should present truth objectively to take hold.

Seeking Truth in 1835 America

The rise of objectivity in science is considered the hallmark of modernity. An example of this can be found in the writings of Charles Lyell. He was one of the first to argue against catastrophic events like Noah's Flood being the cause of major geological processes and that the Earth was much older than traditional Biblical genealogical

calculations. Lyell essentially suggested that Truth was not found in the Word, but in the World through observation and calculation (as noted in Walsh 30). The problem was that before the modern age of science, other scientists had already predicted life would be found on other planets. The year before William Herschel (the well known father of Sir John Herschel) discovered Uranus, he published a paper concerning the lunar mountains, which he claimed was more than likely inhabited. Johann Schroter, whose telescope was only second to Herschel the elder, shared these views and actually claimed to have seen rich cities on the moon. Eclipsing Schroter, the director of the Munich Observatory, Franz von Paula Gruithuisen published several papers claiming he had sighted lunar roads, fortifications and other structures (Crowe 428). Objectivity was moving rapidly though the scientific world and not everyone was quick to keep up.

Scottish theologian and amateur astrologist Thomas Dick entered the scientific discussion by claiming the illuminations from the moon could be "produced by the lunar inhabitance, during their long nights." He offered theological and astronomical arguments for the existence of "sensitive and intelligent" lunarians, and predicted bigger telescopes might furnish an "ocular demonstration" of their existence. He said if life were to be found on the moon, it would be near the location where Herschel the elder discovered volcanoes (Crowe 428-429). Locke no doubt had this in mind when he placed the *Vespertilio-homo* at this precise location on the moon.

Crowe claims that Dick's fame in America was so great that an unnamed American journal noted in 1850: "Perhaps no foreign writer has been more generally read on this side of the Atlantic, for the past twenty years, than Dr. Thomas Dick" (428). The theme of his astronomical writing was laced with both cosmic speculation and pluralist

religion. Dick supported his philosophical work with scientific journals including the *Edinburgh Philosophical Journal* (for example see Dick 159), a journal from the same city as the stated origins of the moon hoax. Dick praised the wisdom of God for placing the Sun at just the right distance so that it could "refresh and cheer us and enliven our soil." Dick's *Christian Philosopher* was reprinted in the *Methodist Magazine and Quarterly Review* less than four months before the moon hoax. Dick refused to preclude life elsewhere in our solar system including on the Sun itself.

The Changing Press

Schiller (77) claims the moon hoax grew out of the tension between the penny papers and their more respectable sixpenny rivals. Soon after Day dropped the price of his newspaper down to a penny circulation no longer was counted in the hundreds, but in the thousands. The American penny press was based on the concept of the *London Times*, a British daily that made most of its profits by single-issue sales rather than subscriptions (Buchholz 141). Many technological advances allowed for the production of this mass-produced product, including the steam press and the availability of a cheaper form of paper. The lower prices allowed for a more literate society to keep updated on the daily happenings in their area (Buchholz 124).

Newspaper production was an artisan craft. The editor-owner wrote most stories and quite often also ran the hand presses that produced the papers. Higher circulations freed the newspapers to become more objective concerning political influences. Crime and judicial stories also reinforced the impression of objective—albeit often sensationalized—truth. Originally, the *New York Sun* was about the size of present day

commercial stationary, with three columns to a page. Day and his competitors in the penny press began to develop what would later be described the human-interest stories and exposed the happenings at police stations, night courts and behind closed residential doors. Such tantalizing fare was written in a colorful style unlike the more expensive elite sixpenny press (Roggenkamp, 4). At the same time, editors moved away from daily involvement in production, changing their roles to publisher-owners and hiring others to do the daily editing of the newspapers. This change allowed the owner to be a public leader rather than a political follower. Many publisher-owners used their newspapers as a platform to enter into politics. An example of this would be the Democratic Party's nomination of Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, as its presidential candidate in 1867. Gentleman publishers employed professional editors and writers who made their money by how many inches they turned in each week. The style became more local, direct, frank and objective. This more professional style of writing, as well as the ribald humor of crime and sensationalism, appealed to a new economic and intellectual level of readership (Buchholz 123).

A large percentage of the newspaper was designated for small advertisements. The rest of the paper normally consisted of in-house written local stories. Normally local stories were inadequate in size to fill the needs of a daily paper so several columns often carried snippets of foreign and domestic news liberally reprinted from other newspapers. The only promotion the hoax received occurred the Friday, August 21 as an item from the *Edinburgh Courant*:

> We have just learnt (sic) from an eminent publisher in this city that Sir John Herschel, at the Cape of Good Hope, has made some astronomical discoveries of the most wonderful description, by means of an immense telescope of an entirely new principal (*Sun* quoted in Seavey, viii).

The promotion was tucked away on the second page among articles about fires in the city, an accidental drowning and an incident at a New Jersey camp meeting (Seavey viii). "Great Astronomical Discoveries" began the following Tuesday. Two newspapers, the *Journal of Commerce* and the *New York Herald,* refused to believe that they had been so thoroughly scooped and denounced the *Sun* series as a hoax almost immediately (Bjork), giving the series the nickname by which it is known today.

The animosity between Day and *Herald* owner James Gordon Bennett became legendary and was obvious in both newspapers. Day, at one point, wrote that Bennett's only chance of dying an upstanding citizen would be by hanging perpendicularly from a rope (Gordon). Bennett published 10 of the 23 editorials about the moon hoax in the four leading New York papers over the following four months, all of them negative. The *Sun* counterbalanced the negative editorials by publishing 11 editorials defending the moon series (Thornton 96).

The *Herald*'s rebuttal to the moon stories initially proved difficult since so many people found the stories so convincing (Schiller 79). Bennett doubted whether the optical principles in the stories correspond with fact (*Herald* 31 August 1835 as noted in Schiller 79). Three days later Bennett complained that the moon stories had strayed too far from reporting facts. "But now, when that paper in order to get money out of a credulous public, seriously persists in averting the truth, it becomes highly improper, wicked, and in fact a species of imprudent swindling." Conveniently, a disgruntled reader of the *Herald* agreed in the same issue, proclaiming "I am determined never again to patronize a paper that has thus egregiously deceived the public—and instead subscribe to the *Herald* or

some other paper, whose veracity can be relied upon" (3 September 1835 as noted in Schiller 79). The *Herald* was not alone in the discussion of factual information in newspapers. The other three leading New York newspapers also included editorials that claimed the most important job for a journalist is to tell the truth (Thornton 96).

All this time Sir William Herschel, the astronomer who allegedly discovered the *Vespertilio-homo*, actually was in South Africa. He had been there for at least a year with his now famously huge telescope, studying the stars not visible from England. At this time South Africa had neither telegraph nor radio. Mail took months to reach its destination. Herschel knew nothing of the abuse of his name until it was too late to stop it (Stokley, 253). A missionary society from Springfield, Massachusetts was one of the first letters concerning the hoax to reach him in Africa. The letter congratulated the astronomer on his discoveries by informing him:

> … It had been the occasion of much edifying preaching and prayer meetings for the benefit of brethren in the newly explored regions; and beseeching him to inform his correspondents whether science affords any prospects of a method of conveying the Gospel to residents on the moon (original quoted in MacDougall 230).

They sought information on how to send missionaries to convert the man-bats—a proposition only a little less practical than that made by Dr. Dick. He proposed demonstrating the truths of Christianity to the *Vespertilio-homo* by creating a series of geometric diagrams exhibited in immense structures of stone here on earth, large enough for the lunar inhabitance to see them (Griggs).

Discovery of Fact

Though many people accepted the basic premise as fact, it did not mean they accepted every aspect of the stories was factual. Griggs tells the story of how he

overheard a respectable looking elderly gentleman in a broadcloth Quaker suit dispel the undecided opinion of the listening crowd around him. The gentleman claimed he was on the East India Docks in London when the gigantic telescope described in the story was taken on board an East India ship heading to the Cape of Good Hope; the statement in the introductory part of the narrative that this shipment was made from St. Catherine's Docks was therefore must have been an error on the part of the Edinburgh writer (Griggs).

Although Rev. Timothy Dwight died twenty years before the moon hoax, his presence was still felt at the Yale University. Dwight served as the president of Yale from 1795 until he died in 1817. The next year 173 of his sermons were published posthumously for the first time. These sermons were then repeated every four years to undergraduates in order to better prepare them for the "Second Great Awakening" (Crowe 428). Dwight referred to the moon as one of many inferior worlds, but certainly the most interesting. "It is most rationally concluded," according to Dwight, that intelligent beings in great multitudes inhabit her lucid regions, being probably far better and happier than ourselves" (Dwight 287). It would not be hard to believe that many professors and students at Yale in 1835 would be quick to believe the moon hoax since it had been preached to them for over twenty years. Two professors accompanied a contingency of students to New York to look at the original supplement. When they arrived at the *Sun* office, they were detained long enough to create a convoluted dance around the city from one printer to the next that ultimately left them disappointed. Others who came to the newspaper office were told that soon letters from the scientific community in Europe would settle the matter once and for all. The anxious readers were told that it would be prudent to suspend any confident opinion one-way or the other.

The problem was that the anticipated letters disproving the *Sun* articles were slow to arrive. The answer tended to tantalize rather than satisfy the impatient curiosity. Within a few weeks, word finally arrived. Instead of exposing "Great Astronomical Discoveries," the letters seemed to confirm the information. English and French scientific journals reprinted the articles without naming the *New York Sun* at all in their attributions. Even the Edinburgh paper, where it must have been instantly recognized as a piece of fiction, published the story (Griggs).

Several Paris newspapers contained reports of elaborate debates at the French Academy of Science concerning the moon stories. The president of the Academy, François Jean Dominique Arago immediately saw through the scientific jargon, but did not see the humor. Instead, he thought it was an attack on his good friend Sir John. He read the articles in their entirety to the assembled academicians amid repeated and uncontrollable laughter from the audience. After what has been deemed an irresistibly comic debate, the assembly passed a resolution stating that the alleged lunar discoveries were not to be regarded as a malicious attack on Sir John and that the articles themselves were utterly incredible (Griggs).

Conclusion

The argument in this paper sought to establish the significance of the moon hoax as a cultural event that rendered visible the stakes in discussions of media objectivity. This was a moment in history where historians can trace the immergence of objectivity. This nascent period in the history of the press reveals some of the early dimensions of the struggle between producing news as information and entertainment. Hopefully,

explicating the relationship between these concepts will allow for a deeper understanding of the moral development of journalistic standards for propriety.

Objectivity is a term mostly defined in the negative: unbiased, free from partiality, not influenced by feelings. By the time the *Sun* published "Great Astronomical Discoveries" scholars, religious leaders and the common reader of the day expected a different type of truth than what today's readers should expect. Locke wrote the piece to express satirical truth, a form of truth more analytical than objective. The objective truth was promised by the *Sun* as soon as it arrived from Europe. The articles became a catalyst for a conversation both in public and in the media concerning what was truth, where it could be found, where and how it should be presented in a news medium. People were quick to believe the stories because the stories confirmed what religious leaders and trusted scientists were already speculating. Although eventually the scientific truth indeed came from Paris, it is important to note that truth was present in every stage of the moon hoax. Yet objectivity becomes an enigma. It is a question rather than an answer, a point of debate rather than dogma (Mindich 5).

Sixty years earlier during the American Revolution, newspaper editors who claimed to be objective were often tar and feathered, ran out of town or saw their printing presses tossed into the river (Humphrey 51-68). Political parties kept most newspapers in major cities afloat until about two years before the moon hoax (Sloan, 69-94). Objectivity is a term journalists began using during the time of the penny press to express their commitment not only to impartiality but to reflecting the world as it is without bias or distortion of any sort (Stephens 253). More work is needed to determine how the penny press could so quickly share this new social experience of a daily dose of objective news

with a willing public. Nevertheless, it is irrefutable that this relationship between audience and media was far more intimate than any previous newspaper era.

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