

by Carolyn Fraser

A Little World of Letters: Amateur Journalism in America

The word amateur has come by the thousand oddities of language to convey an idea of tepidity; whereas the word itself has the meaning of passion. Nor is this peculiarity confined to the mere form of the word; the actual characteristic of these nameless dilettanti is a genuine fire and reality. A man must love a thing very much if he practices it without any hope of fame or money, but even practice it without any hope of doing it well. Such a man must love the toils of the work more than any other man can love the rewards of it. — G. K. CHESTERTON



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Waves of printing fever struck American boys and girls from the 1840's as the advent of small and cheap printing presses coincided with the rise of the middle-class. The mid-nineteenth century saw the first American teenagers—youth with both the leisure time and education to engage in intellectually stimulating hobbies. Some found entry into the job printing trades through their practice on toy presses, others saw hobby printing as a means of expression, identifying as amateur journalists and editors. These boys and girls produced runs of small papers, pamphlets and journals circulated in their communities and increasingly, amongst themselves.

The year 1867 marks the beginning of what is considered the “Golden Age” of amateur journalism. Benjamin O. Woods of Boston offered his Novelty Press for sale, advertising in journals marketed to young people. The press sold for a few dollars, and local old hands were happy to hand over their hell boxes to budding printers. News of amateur presses was reported in journals such as *Oliver Optic's Magazine*, prompting amateur journalists to make contact with each other and to exchange publications, comparing and competing over content, form and craftsmanship.

In 1876, the efforts of twelve amateur printers saw the organisation of the first convention of the National Amateur Press Association, held

in Philadelphia on the 4th of July to coincide with the city's Centennial Exposition. Sixty-five amateur journalists attended; a display of toy and novelty presses at the Exposition was thought to inspire a surge of interest in the hobby.

A history of amateur journalism in the United States is as much a history of craft and self-expression as it is a history of democratic organisational structures. It has been suggested that the love of organisation is a peculiarly American trait. Mike Horvat, in his essay about the early history of NAPA, notes that “Confronted with any task, the first impulse is to form an organization, elect a President and a Secretary, and appoint a committee to do the work.” The history of the formation of organisations devoted to the promotion and continuance of amateur journalism as a hobby is one of intense politicking, splits, rival factions, revenge and double-crosses as dramatic as seen in any union or on any national political stage. Reading convention reports from the nineteenth century, it bears reminding that the protagonists were almost exclusively teenagers, some not even that old. Publications might last for a single issue or season; a run of five to six years placed the amateur journalist in a pantheon of greats. It is unsurprising to learn that many amateur journalism hobbyists of the Golden Age of the late nineteenth century became important figures in political and intellectual life.

The second great wave of interest in amateur journalism occurred in the 1930s, when the Kelsey Company advertised its small, inexpensive presses extensively in *Boy's Life*-type magazines. As a hobby, amateur journalism was well established. Local groups existed in every state and the annual conventions moved around the country. Within journalism and the printing trades, a history as a “boy printer” was seen as a badge of honour. Former “boy printers” often continued publishing amateur journalism while conducting their professional adult careers. The Fossils, an alumni organisation for “Amateur Editors, Authors and Printers of the Past”, held their first meeting at the Montauk Club in Brooklyn, NY in 1904. The collecting efforts of Edwin Hadley Smith, a founding member of The Fossils, saw the establishment of the Library of Amateur Journalism, a collection now housed at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This archive is remarkable in pre-

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serving ephemera produced by children, young people and hobbyists, and gives comprehensive insight into the interests, concerns and obsessions of these amateurs, perspectives otherwise lost to history.

From their inception, the members of groups such as the NAPA, the American Amateur Press Association (AAPA) and the United Amateur Press Association (UAPA), have produced publications in quantities sufficient to supply every member. Subject matters are limited only by the imaginations of the publishers. The printed pieces are mailed to designated person, often known as the Central Mailer, who sorts, collates and mails the publications in what is known as “the bundle” to every member in good standing. This style of organisation, known as an APA, can be seen as the forerunner to electronic bulletin boards and the internet.

In 2010, for the first time, the AAPA and NAPA held concurrent conventions in Chicago. Amateur journalism is no longer the preserve of the young: Harold Smolin, current AAPA member, was present at the AAPA's first convention, held in Chicago in 1938. Louise Lincoln continues to publish her journal, the *Kitchen Stove*, at age 95. Current AAPA President Mike O'Connor's career in amateur journalism began in 1958 as a 12 year-old and was sustained throughout his professional career as a newspaperman in Minnesota. One of the youngest active members of AAPA is Susan Petrone, 42, a second-generation AAPA member, who inherited both her press and press name—The Ink Casino—from her mother. The contentious rifts that separated the two organisations in the past have healed with time and perhaps, with the aging demographic of their memberships. Today, many amateur journalists are now active members of the AAPA, NAPA and The Fossils concurrently.

APA-style amateur journalism pre-dates both zine and blog culture. As hobby organisations with ageing memberships, amateur

journalism associations are grappling with questions about the future of their modes of production and distribution. What is clear, however, is that amateur journalism itself is not under threat; that in fact, amateur journalism in its broadest sense is stronger than ever and is posing serious threat to traditional models of professional media. In an era in which professional journalism has been wracked by threats from various online media, subsequent plummeting pay scales, and the closure of venerable newspapers, journals and magazines, fingers are being pointed at the amateur. In his polemic, *The Cult of the Amateur: how today's internet is killing our culture*, former Silicon Valley entrepreneur Andrew Keen rails against cultural and technological changes that have devalued expertise and created a culture in which he sees truth undermined, plagiarism encouraged and creativity stifled. According to Keen, the “democratised chaos” evidenced in contemporary culture—Wikipedia, YouTube, blogs written by dogs—threatens both American values and culture.

Rare today is the use of the word “hobby” (other than pejoratively.) People have “projects” these days; the pursuit of pleasure has been supplanted in almost every area of life by economic imperatives. We may be witnessing the very last generation of APA-style amateur journalists, but the influence of their activity has been vast. Gutenberg's press augured the beginnings of the Enlightenment. The toy press gave voice to America's youth. The internet is transforming traditional media. Experimentation breeds expertise, amateurism breeds passion. America would be as equally impoverished had Thomas Edison not published the *Grand Trunk Herald* as had he not invented the phonograph, the telegraph or the electric light bulb. The word amateur comes from the Latin—amator—lover. This is what lasts—that which we love. Our culture depends on it. **U**