

‘A TOMB FOR THE LIVING’: AN ANALYSIS OF LATE 19TH-CENTURY
UNITED STATES NEWSPAPER REPORTING ON THE INSANE ASYLUM

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: 'A Tomb for the Living': An Analysis of Late 19th-Century Newspaper Reporting on the Insane Asylum

This study examines newspaper portrayals of the American insane asylum between 1887 and 1895. The focus is on the way the mental health system was represented to the public in the era of Nellie Bly, the stunt journalist who investigated a Manhattan insane asylum in 1887. The project reveals the ways in which the newspapers aggregated a variety of narratives around the insane asylum which ultimately presented the institution in such a way that served the needs of the press.

For those without firsthand knowledge of the insane asylum, the newspaper was the primary source of information. In that medium, there was a system of knowledge created and disseminated, one that integrated and conflated the public answer to mental illness with other sociopolitical issues such as economics, crime, gender, and ethnicity. The content created a meaning in which the deteriorating asylum system was presented contradictorily as an ineffective yet permanent public reality.

Furthermore, newspapers reinforced and augmented an existing shame around mental illness. Mental illness evolved from a private/family concern to one of public import over the course of the 19th century. Thus, mental affliction became more than a moral failing or a character flaw; it had been elevated to a social problem to be tended by the government. Therefore, the problem of the mentally ill fell under the jurisdiction of the metro newspaper, which often published articles relaying asylum expenses, investigations into the failing asylums themselves, or speculations as to the cause of a person's sickness.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When I was a journalist covering public health issues, I became intrigued by the relationship among the press, media coverage of mental illness, and the creation of public policy around mental health. I reported on disastrous mid-year budget cuts to state-funded mental health services; casualties suffered by a group with no significant constituency. Additionally, I watched my industry report on mass shootings and conjecture that the primary reason for the act(s) was mental illness. I am intrigued by the connection between the two phenomena, the “othering” of the mentally ill, undeserving of promised services while simultaneously dangerous and menacing. I found value in Foucault’s chronological interrogation into madness, as well as asylum historians like Andrew Scull and Gerald Grob.

There has been no historical account of how the newspapers relayed information about the then mainstream public mental health system, the insane asylum, in the 19th century. The Gilded Age is a crucial time period to investigate the history of the press’s portrayal of mental health. The period saw synchronous disruptions in both the worlds of news and public mental health treatment: explosive circulation and financial prosperity on the press side and a collapsing treatment model and unprecedented committal rates in American insane asylums. In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, mental illness was a growing social concern but it wasn’t insulated from other social conflicts of the time. Insanity was deeply embedded with gender, race, and class. This project came into existence to fill a gap left by studies into contemporary media portrayals of insanity that do not take into account the phenomenon’s historical baggage.

This dissertation shows how the period’s newspaper coverage commingled the asylum—the public surrogate for mental illness care—with partisan politics, race and gender prejudices, among other areas. It does so by examining newspaper portrayals of American insane asylums between 1887 and 1895.¹ The newspaper was the primary source of information for those that did not have firsthand knowledge of the insane asylum. Its coverage integrated and conflated the public response to mental illness with other sociopolitical issues like economics, crime, gender, and ethnicity. The press covered what had become, by 1887, a deteriorating asylum system as an *ineffective yet permanent* public reality.

Mental illness was a tax on prosperity, a major cost to state and local budgets. Therefore, it became the jurisdiction of the metro newspaper to examine the “problem of mental illness,” be that through articles relaying asylum expenses, investigating the failing asylums themselves, or speculating as to the cause of a person’s sickness.

This project aims to be counted as a “history from below,” one that adds a piece to the tapestry of a people that have never had a powerful constituency, the mentally ill.

The project, therefore, will explore the way the metropolitan newspapers documented the American insane asylums at a time when newspapers were the dominant communications medium and asylums were faltering yet growing.

The Study

In the late 19th century, the American insane asylum was the place to treat, or at least contain, mentally ill Americans. However, the system had a limping effectiveness

¹ A handful of articles from 1886 were included in the sample but mainly from the *Chicago Tribune* and those articles augmented, rather than supplemented, the data set.

and was the target of public pity and scorn.² Paradoxically, the asylum system also began to experience extraordinary population growth during this period.³ In 1860, the population of the United States was 31.4 million and the patient population in asylums was roughly 8,500. By 1890 the population in the United States doubled to 63 million and the patient population in asylums increased nearly nine-fold to 75,000.⁴ This project may not be able to accurately explain the meteoric rise but will pull in conjectures found in daily newspapers about the phenomenon.

This study, supported by scholarship discussed below, initially sought out to investigate American newspaper content to determine what issues of stigma and discrimination were apparent, and to what extent, in the Pre-Progressive era. It asked, generally: what did newspapers publish about asylums during the period of 1887-1895? To answer this question, a content analysis combined with primary historical document analysis was employed. However, the project of finding media stigma around mental illness developed into a more narrow and focused dissertation showing just how universal the asylum was for a market-driven press. The insane asylum stories fit into almost every area of concern to Gilded-age newspaper readers: economics, politics, crime, love, and the bizarre. The following questions were used to enter into and organize the study.

To what extent were news articles political, compassionate, economic, critical,

² Lauren Hoopes, "On the Periphery: A Survey of Nineteenth-Century Asylums in the United States," 2015, http://tigerprints.clemson.edu/all_theses/2123/.

³ John Sutton, "The Political Economy of Madness," *American Sociological Review*, 1991, 665–78.

⁴ William E. Baxter and David W. Hathcox III, *America's Care of the Mentally Ill: A Photographic History*, accessed March 15, 2016, <http://www.biblio.com/book/americas-care-mentally-ill-photographic-history/d/826436563>.

etc. about asylums? My preliminary research suggested that newspaper asylum content was more concerned with the political and economic impact of asylums than with actual mental health outcomes and the findings bore that assumption out. The press largely covered the insane asylums through the lens of the courtroom and policymakers. Moreover, newspapers would also balance their coverage with entreaties for pity and compassion for committed patients.

How did the professional medical community discuss the asylum? Was moral treatment still an operative term? As will be discussed, the medical community was in a state of flux. The era of 1885-1895 was a time when practitioners were trying to establish common grounds for the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness and the asylum was a primary site for such efforts. This study found that the press avoided almost all coverage of the actual practice of mental health treatment. This creates an interesting area for future studies to determine: why did the press, which seemed to gravitate toward sites of conflict and public import, remain silent on the medical field?

Was there a relationship between public policy/funding and newspaper content? Currently, there is a swell of attention paid to the issue of mental health stigma and policies are being drafted, at the state and federal level, to meet the growing concern. The Rand Technical Report notes that media campaigns can help shift public sympathy.⁵ That sympathy can then be turned into binding public policy. By cross-comparing policy documents with the content analysis findings, correlations can be drawn between the two late 19th century institutions (newspapers and asylums). In order to approach this question, I pulled a number of biennial reports and primary state budget documents.

⁵ Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Majority Staff, “Energy and Commerce Committee Memorandum,” Memorandum, 2014.

Documents from the state of Texas proved most difficult to obtain and therefore became one limitation to the study's scope. The study includes two subsections that explicate the political background of Oregon and Illinois concerning public policy and asylum funding/management. What comes from this data is the finding that the asylums, at the time, dominated public policy and funding. The shifting landscape of jurisdictional funding and oversight when complicated by partisan disagreements made for a lush area of content for the press.

Did the newspapers reify/reinforce ethnic/gender stereotypes in terms of racial inferiority/superiority? Scholars have determined that some alienists/psychotherapists argued that certain ethnicities were more prone to lunacy: Did ideas like “The Irish Problem” or “The Black Psychology” make their ways into the metro newspaper?⁶ The study finds that minorities were not present in newspaper articles nearly as prominently as secondary literature might suggest, an area taken up later in the project. Women were covered to the extent that they fit into certain Victorian models of femininity but, again, the press strayed from secondary literature findings in that the articles didn't indicate that women's mental illness was explicitly a result of being female.

Did newspapers from cities that were closer to major state asylums, relative to those that were farther, present asylum information (through volume or tone) differently?

Geography will act as an analytic for measuring the political. Findings suggest

⁶ Ann L. Magennis and Michael G. Lacy, “Demography and Social Epidemiology of Admissions to the Colorado Insane Asylum, 1879–1899,” *Social Science History* 38, no. 1–2 (2014): 251–71, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2015.18>; Laura Briggs, “The Race of Hysteria: “Overcivilization” and the “Savage” in Late Nineteenth-Century Obstetrics and Gynecology,” *American Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2000): 246–73, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2000.0013>.

that cities closest to major asylums had higher rates of internment.⁷ Also, the cities that hosted the asylums benefitted from the state money and jobs that poured in, often to the displeasure of competing cities. So, the project will look geographically at newspaper coverage. The study finds that the Salem, Oregon newspaper was far more protective of the state asylum than its counterparts. This is likely because the paper was instrumental to the city and its politics. Conversely, the Galveston, Texas newspaper was the least concerned with the affairs of the two major state asylums and this is likely because the city was 200 miles from the closest institution.

History and Context

The United States public mental health system is currently in crisis.⁸ The policies of deinstitutionalization and community care paired with the epidemic rates of psychotropic drug prescription/usage have not solved the public mental health dilemma.⁹ In fact, the penal systems serving the nation's three largest cities (New York, Chicago and Los Angeles) are also the nation's three largest providers of mental health care.¹⁰

⁷ Christopher A. Smith, David Wright, and Shawn Day, "Distancing the Mad: Jarvis's Law and the Spatial Distribution of Admissions to the Hamilton Lunatic Asylum in Canada, 1876–1902," *Social Science & Medicine* 64, no. 11 (June 2007): 2362–77, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2007.01.003>; Valerie Palmer-Mehta, "Refracting Mental Illness Through Disability: Towards a New Politic of Cultural Locations," *The Journal of American Culture* 36, no. 4 (2013): 353–363.

⁸ Charles A. Kiesler, "U.S. Mental Health Policy: Doomed to Fail.," *American Psychologist* 47, no. 9 (1992): 1077–82, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.47.9.1077>; Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Majority Staff, "Energy and Commerce Committee Memorandum."

⁹ Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations Majority Staff, "Energy and Commerce Committee Memorandum."

¹⁰ Michael Arceneaux, "Why Are The Three Largest Mental Health Care Providers Jails?," *News One* (blog), October 24, 2013, <http://newsone.com/2744141/prisons-mental-health-providers/>.

This is not a far stretch from the situation in the mid-1800s when social crusaders lobbied for specialized care for the mentally ill.

Research has shown that public stigma toward mental health is one of the top impediments to having a more viable American public mental health system.¹¹ Similarly, studies in communications have shown that the news media are one of the primary producers of this stigma.¹² These studies have shown that news portrayals often link mental illness with crime, danger, and instability. However, the news media does not proportionately publish stories about healing and or recovery.

As recently as 2013, the California TeamUp project found that California newspapers were guilty of mischaracterizing mental illness.¹³ The project's authors released a set of benchmarks for newspapers to meet for more balanced mental health reporting. The Associated Press, just two years ago, in partnership with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), released a set of guidelines for news outlets reporting on a story that includes any aspect of mental health.¹⁴ Guidelines from both of the items

¹¹ Patrick W. Corrigan, Benjamin G. Druss, and Deborah A. Perlick, "The Impact of Mental Illness Stigma on Seeking and Participating in Mental Health Care," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* 15, no. 2 (October 1, 2014): 37–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100614531398>; David Satcher, "Mental Health: A Report of the Surgeon General--Executive Summary," *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 31, no. 1 (2000): 5–13, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.31.1.5>.

¹² Corrigan, Druss, and Perlick, "The Impact of Mental Illness Stigma on Seeking and Participating in Mental Health Care"; Douglas Glick and Kalman Applbaum, "Dangerous Noncompliance: A Narrative Analysis of a CNN Special Investigation of Mental Illness," *Anthropology & Medicine* 17, no. 2 (August 2010): 229–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13648470.2010.493605>; Julia A. Maier et al., "Media Influences on Self-Stigma of Seeking Psychological Services: The Importance of Media Portrayals and Person Perception.," *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034504>.

¹³ "California News Media Analysis," n.d.

¹⁴ "NAMI | Entry on Mental Illness Added to AP Stylebook," accessed May 19, 2014, http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=Top_Story&template=%2Fcontentmanagement%2Fcontentdisplay.cfm&ContentID=151746&title=Entry+on+Mental+Illness+Added+to+AP+Stylebook.

mentioned above include not mentioning any mental health issues unless they are substantiated and germane to the story and avoiding generalizing or stereotyping language. In essence, the guidelines strive for balance in mental health reporting. The AP and TeamUp, however, do not have any binding control over affiliated news outlets; their guidelines are merely recommendations. Indeed, the American public mental health system and the mainstream news media share in the issue of stigmatization. Advocacy organizations are working from a number of angles to curb the harmful impacts of mental illness stigma.

The Asylum System

By the Gilded Age, many cities had on their outskirts public works buildings, hospitals, and at least one insane asylum. The asylums featured opulent grounds, dazzling enormity, and mushrooming decay. A generation prior, the asylum had been a hallmark of socialized charity so heralded that elites would travel by train to witness the curing of lunatics through hard work and moral adjustment.¹⁵ The Bellum era asylums, operating on Pinel's system of moral treatment, a form of occupational therapy, produced tremendous results, with healing and recovery rates approaching 100 percent in some cases.¹⁶ Some have speculated that the dramatic recovery rates were because moral treatment practitioners didn't have accurate measures for ascertaining actual recovery.

¹⁵ John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (Univ of Massachusetts Press, 1998); Lawrence A. Osborn, "From Beauty to Despair: The Rise and Fall of the American State Mental Hospital," *Psychiatric Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (December 2009): 219–31, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11126-009-9109-3>.

¹⁶ Abraham S. Luchins, "Moral Treatment in Asylums and General Hospitals in 19th-Century America," *Journal of Psychology* 123, no. 6 (November 1989): 585.

Nevertheless, the system of moral treatment failed. By the 1870s, patient recidivism reached chronic levels.¹⁷ The funding mechanism for most asylums shifted to a state-payer system and townships sloughed their “unwanted” to state facilities.¹⁸ “Incurables” clogged Gilded-Age asylum halls. Moral treatment, founded on teaching Victorian values on a pastoral estate, was stifled by sheer volume.¹⁹ Professional administrators and political appointees began to replace doctors and alienists at the institutional helm(s).²⁰ The new system, marked mainly by keeping patients from hurting themselves and others, was coined Custodial Care.²¹

Advances in the physical sciences, on an arguably linear trajectory, stood in contrast to a fledgling and entropic psychotherapy. Psychotherapeutic breakthroughs published in medical journals often met with a series of counter-arguments that obscured anything that resembled forward movement. Acrimonious practitioners would assault each other in lectures and periodicals, claiming one or another therapy method was best. Some gynecologists averred that hysterectomies were the way to cure female asylum patients, while hydrotherapists argued alternating warm and cold baths could cure most

¹⁷ Sutton, “The Political Economy of Madness.”

¹⁸ Benjamin Reiss, *Theaters of Madness: Insane Asylums and Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹⁹ Luchins, “Moral Treatment in Asylums and General Hospitals in 19th-Century America.”

²⁰ Lynne M. Getz, “‘A Strong Man of Large Human Sympathy’: Dr. Patrick L. Murphy and the Challenges of Nineteenth-Century Asylum Psychiatry in North Carolina,” *The North Carolina Historical Review*, 2009, 32–58.

²¹ Danielle Terbenche, “‘Curative’ and ‘Custodial’: Benefits of Patient Treatment at the Asylum For the Insane, Kingston, 1878-1906,” *Canadian Historical Review* 86, no. 1 (2005): 29–52.

nervous ailments.²² Still, there were those that thought some mental disorders were ethnic problems. Progress came in fits and starts.²³ There was no central body dictating procedures for practitioners, the National Board of Health was only a few years old and had limited powers. In addition, the American Psychiatric Association, a voluntary organization with no real governing powers, was not founded until 1892. The fledgling field of mental health was as much a best-guess practice as it was scientific.

The asylum, however flawed, was the main public service for mental illness in its many forms: lunacy, hysteria, epilepsy, idiocy, and an enormous list of variants. At the state level, the operation usually took up a significant portion of the budget, often outstripping spending on any other public good.²⁴ In spite of lurching progress, asylums across the nation were constantly expanding to accommodate growing patient populations, some of the buildings holding ten times or more the number of residents they were designed to house.²⁵

The facilities, as expensive as they were, were often underfunded and overcrowded. Public sentiment toward the institutions began to turn negative. Osborn wrote, “The idea that mental illness was curable, especially in an asylum, began to

²² David Wright, Laurie Jacklin, and Tom Themeles, “Dying to Get Out of the Asylum: Mortality and Madness in Four Mental Hospitals in Victorian Canada, c. 1841–1891,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 87, no. 4 (2013): 591–621, <https://doi.org/10.1353/bhm.2013.0079>; Frederick Peterson, “Hydrotherapy in the Treatment of Nervous and Mental Diseases,” *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences (1827-1924)*; 105, no. 2 (February 1893): 132–41.

²³ John Van Bibber, “Article III.: Intermediate Hospitals for the Treatment of Acute...,” *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences (1827-1924)*; 89, no. 177 (January 1885): 38–42.

²⁴ Sutton, “The Political Economy of Madness.”

²⁵ Andrew T. Scull, “Madness and Segregative Control: The Rise of the Insane Asylum,” *Social Problems*, 1977, 337–351.

change due to the longevity of most patients' stays.”²⁶ Furthermore, Wright points out that the late 19th century public was still largely influenced by centuries-old notions about mental illness²⁷—notions that include mental illness being aligned with sorcery and demonic possession, for example. Wright adds that the lay public hadn't conceded to medical science yet. The two factors, an exhausted asylum system and a superstitious middle class, the asylum, its physical presence and its entrants, were stigmatized. The asylum patients were subject to two of Goffman's stigmas: individual character blemishes and institutional stigma race and religious affiliation.²⁸

The world-renowned Scottish psychiatrist Thomas Clouston put his finger on the issue of stigma in the introduction to his manual of psychiatric lectures in 1884 saying:

There is a sort of morbid delicacy, too in the public mind, about the matter, which often prevents a man, when he feels his mental balance insecure, from consulting his doctor. That abominable and cruel phase of public sentiment, which connects shame and disgrace with mental disease, does an immense amount of harm to individuals and society, and our profession should, by all means, fight against it. That this prejudice of the Middle Ages should exist at all is the strongest proof of the ignorance of the matter.

Newspapers

The daily newspaper was one of the only ways for urban residents to know what was happening with their local/regional asylums. It was through the newspaper that citizens learned about who was being taken to the asylum, why they were being committed, what wing was being expanded and the associated costs. Some editorials in

²⁶ Osborn, “From Beauty to Despair.”

²⁷ Wright, Jacklin, and Themeles, “Dying to Get Out of the Asylum.”

²⁸ Erving Goffman, *Goffman_Erving_The_Presentation_of_Self_in_Everyday_Life.Pdf*, n.d.

the late 19th century newspaper would criticize the asylum as part of a corrupt patronage system, while other editorials would plead for sympathy for this-or-that society woman who was unfortunately committed. In a sense, the American mind was divided over the nature and utility of asylums, and that confusion/emotion played out on the pages of the daily news.

There was no journalism code of ethics yet; journalism schools were still over a decade away. Newspaper workers learned their trade through apprenticeships and informal training. The journalist/reporter was a fledgling position. It was the age of the editor. These people often wanted to root out social ills while selling newspapers: many newspapers. The news industry and the asylum system were, by today's standards, unwieldy. In their own rights, they were both political and economic sites. Moreover, they both served, if somewhat superficially, the public good. It made intuitive sense that the lunatic asylum was a mainstay of the news pages. In fact, a search in *Chronicling America* for "insane asylum" returned more than 70,000 hits for the period 1880-1900, a massive increase over the twenty years prior at just 15,000 hits, and the subsequent period, 1900-1920, yielding 60,000 instances.

An excerpt from an article in the *Charlotte Home and Democrat* from January 9, 1885, about the North Carolina Asylum, is emblematic of the degree to which insane asylums were part of the regular news diet:

The reports of this institution are made by Dr. E. Burke Haywood, President of the Board of Directors, and by Dr. Eugene Grissom, the Superintendent, and are for the year ending Nov. 30, 1884. Dr. Haywood says the Board are anxious to receive all acutely insane patients as soon as possible. The number of admissions exceeded that in any year previous. Some figures presented, giving the startling increase in insanity, may be referred to. In 1860 the ratio of insane persons to the whole population of the country was 1 to 1,308; in 1870 it was 1 to 1,030, while in 1880 it was 1 to 545! The total number of insane reported in North

Carolina is 2,028, of which 1,591 are white and 437 colored.

This single article encompasses the many ways Gilded Age newspapers covered insane asylums. The above report estimates that the insane asylum expenditures ate up about ten percent of North Carolina's state budget.²⁹ Furthermore, the newspaper article discusses cure rates and chronicity as well as the endemic rise of insanity and the need to expand the state facilities to accommodate the growth. The *Charlotte Home and Democrat* was a popular weekly that catered to southern and western North Carolina as well as adjacent counties in South Carolina. At the time, the city had over 7,000 residents and Mecklenburg County held nearly 40,000.³⁰

The article used above was typical for the time and I find that many newspapers would report with equal depth on asylum finances. The writer argues that the North Carolina asylum system was costly and potentially dangerous, additionally the article presented insanity as a pox impervious to the best technology they had to curb it. This example is only one type of article. Others would extensively detail the "poor" lawyer's wife and her inability to reason, while others would simply say "An insane Mexican was taken to the asylum..."

Preliminary research suggests that the asylum was linked to numerous other social arenas through the newspaper. Mental illness stigma is not isolated to madness by itself but imbricated with numerous threads of social conflict including partisan politics, race,

²⁹ *Appletons' Annual Cyclopædia and Register of Important Events ...: Embracing Political, Military, and Ecclesiastical Affairs; Public Documents; Biography, Statistics, Commerce, Finance, Literature, Science, Agriculture, and Mechanical Industry. V.[1]-15, 1861-75; V.16-35 (New Ser., V.1-20) 1876-95; V.36-42 (3d. Ser., V.1-7) 1896-1902* (D. Appleton, 1889).

³⁰ "Population Statistics | Charlotte Mecklenburg Story," accessed March 16, 2016, <http://www.cmstory.org/content/population-statistics>.

and gender roles. Contemporary research into mental illness stigma in the media typically does not broaden its view to include the historical view or overlapping social phenomena tied in with stigma.

The scope of this research is exploratory in the sense that studies on the historical relationship between the press and the insane asylum—proxy for mental illness—are very few. While the project is exhaustive in culling data from various newspapers, state documents, and medical journals, the findings point to areas for future scholarship as will be addressed in the final chapter.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent Problems

In some respects, this project emerges from my master's thesis work, which looked at how the news media typically reports on mass shootings. My investigation found that mass-shooting coverage often involves some mention of the mental state of the accused assailant. Beyond that, news reporters tend to violate the principle of objectivity in publishing hearsay and speculation about the shooter(s)' mental illness: Adam Lanza (Newtown) and the Autism spectrum or Jared Lee Loughner (Tucson) and schizophrenia, for example. However, the principle of objectivity is not the main question that this project interrogates, rather the tenuous relationship between news media and mental illness is at the heart of the project. The manner in which the news media cover mass shootings is a major driver in the way that news consumers come to understand mental illness and, as a result, to fear those with mental illness.³¹ This phenomenon may be explained by the fact that the majority of contemporary news stories mentioning mental illness link the ailment to violence and unpredictability.³² Furthermore, media portrayals

³¹ Emma E. McGinty, Daniel W. Webster, and Colleen L. Barry, "Effects of News Media Messages about Mass Shootings on Attitudes toward Persons with Serious Mental Illness and Public Support for Gun Control Policies," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 170, no. 5 (2013): 494–501.

³² Emma E. McGinty et al., "Trends In News Media Coverage Of Mental Illness In The United States: 1995–2014," *Health Affairs* 35, no. 6 (June 1, 2016): 1121–29, <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2016.0011>; Tracy Pugh, Mark Hatzenbuehler, and Bruce Link, "Structural Stigma and Mental Illness," 2015, http://sites.nationalacademies.org/cs/groups/dbassesite/documents/webpage/dbasse_170045.pdf; Jane Pirkis and Catherine Francis, "Mental Illness in the News and the Information Media," *A Critical Review. Www. Mindframe-Media. Info*, 2012; Joel Rasmussen et al., *Media Images of Mental Illness and Psychiatric Care in Connection with Violent Crimes: A Study of Dagens Nyheter, Aftonbladet and Rapport* (Hägersten: Swedish Association for Social and Mental Health (Riksförbundet för social och mental hälsa) (RSMH), 2005).

play a role in self-stigma, where people with mental illnesses are less likely to seek help because they believe others will judge them as violent or unpredictable.³³

Activists, scholars, and media professionals have begun to take action on the issue, to initially mixed results. A major thrust in recent measures to mitigate the press's stigmatizing tone is to increase the number of stories on healing and recovery to balance out the more negatively perceived news items.³⁴

In 2013, the Associated Press added a new entry in their style guide calling for better mental health reporting. The recommendation called for news agencies to be more discerning when reporting on mental health issues and to use language that is more accurate. The TeamUp project in California, launched the same year as the AP announcement, found newspapers in the nation's most populous state were guilty of using stigmatizing content the majority of the time, but the study also showed that there had been an increase in reporting on mental health services and recovery stories.³⁵ Most recently, a British study found mainstream newspapers had increased their volume of reporting on mental health related issues from 2008-2014, and while there was a decrease in content elements like "dangerousness" and "personal responsibility" there was a significant increase in reporting that portrayed people suffering from mental illness as

³³ Otto F. Wahl, "Mental Health Consumers' Experience of Stigma.," *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 25, no. 3 (1999): 467; Julia A. Maier et al., "Media Influences on Self-Stigma of Seeking Psychological Services: The Importance of Media Portrayals and Person Perception.," *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 3, no. 4 (2014): 239–56, <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034504>; Heather Stuart, "Media Portrayal of Mental Illness and Its Treatments," *CNS Drugs* 20, no. 2 (2006): 99–106.

³⁴ Otto Wahl, "Depictions of Mental Illnesses in Children's Media," *Journal of Mental Health* 12, no. 3 (January 2003): 249–58, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0963823031000118230>.

³⁵ admin, "About the Program," *Team Up* (blog), accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.eiconline.org/teamup/about-teamup/>.

“hopeless victims.”³⁶ This finding was similar to an older study that portrayed the mentally ill as having been failed by the system with little hope outside of taking pharmaceutical drugs.³⁷

The concepts of “volatility” “dangerousness” and “hopelessness” have been linked with insanity since the Middle Ages, and likely longer.³⁸ However, the stigmatizing themes solidified their places in mainstream newspaper reporting during the final decades of the nineteenth century.

Why newspaper history?

While the asylum period is in the past, it is not in a sealed vault. Asylum histories are sites of contestation in the retelling of a longstanding relationship with psychiatry, madness and *un-reason*.³⁹ Asylum histories have been performed using archival material, poems, letters to and from patients, but not yet through the daily newspaper.

For centuries, newspaper histories focused on the deeds and accomplishments of one “great” leader, the Rankean historical style. James Carey calls this Whiggish history, or a history that shows a slow and methodical march toward prosperity and efficiency. James Carey called instead for a newspaper history that tried to recreate the conversations

³⁶ D. Rhydderch et al., “Changes in Newspaper Coverage of Mental Illness from 2008 to 2014 in England,” *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* 134 (August 1, 2016): 45–52, <https://doi.org/10.1111/acps.12606>.

³⁷ Glick and Applbaum, “Dangerous Noncompliance.”

³⁸ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (Random House LLC, 2013).

³⁹ Anna Harpin, “Revisiting the Puzzle Factory: Cultural Representations of Psychiatric Asylums,” *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* 38, no. 4 (December 2013): 335–50, <https://doi.org/10.1179/0308018813Z.00000000063>.

of the past in order to understand the cultural consciousness of the people.⁴⁰ Recently, historians have been documenting the lived experiences of people on the lower rungs of the social hierarchy--women, minorities, immigrants, etc.-- in a practice known as history from below.⁴¹ Historical newspapers are a rich site for inquiry because they were typically not written for historical posterity, so they offer a better view of the sentiments of their time and allow historians to reconstruct national conversations.⁴²

This brief history will take the early 1800s as the entry point. The period was significant to this project because it saw the beginnings of the insane asylum movement, led by crusader Dorothea Dix, as well as the advent of a new style of newspaper, one that moved away from its partisan past and focused on mass appeal. What follows will show two institutions whose unprecedented growth over the following decades had the metro newspaper and the state-run insane asylum dominating their respective landscapes by the 1880s.

Dorothea Dix and Benjamin Day

In the early 1800s, the French physician Philippe Pinel pioneered a new style of working with the mentally ill. He theorized that insanity was caused by psychological *and* physiological factors and could potentially be cured through a controlled therapeutic environment. In the Pinel system, patients were boarded in a bucolic estate where they

⁴⁰ James W. Carey, "The Problem of Journalism History," *Journalism History*, 1974.

⁴¹ Jim Sharpe, "History From Below," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke, Second Edition edition (University Park, Pa: Penn State University Press, 2001).

⁴² John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods and New Directions in the Study of History*, 6 Edition (London: Routledge, 2015); John Nerone, "Genres of Journalism History," *The Communication Review* 13, no. 1 (February 26, 2010): 15–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714420903558639>.

would receive talk therapy and be given “meaningful” labor and exercise. The system was very much like the one being developed by Pinel’s British contemporary, William Tuke. They wanted to give patients the same environment that the bourgeois took for granted, it came to be known as moral treatment.⁴³

By the late 1830s, the conditions suffered by the mentally ill in Massachusetts, at least the ones without the means for private treatment, were deplorable. The educator Dorothea Dix, born in 1802, was hired to teach religious classes at the East Cambridge jail where she was horrified to find, among other abuses, mentally ill patients held in open-air cells in the dead of winter. She enlisted her friend Dr. S.G. Howe to advocate on the behalf of these “shivering wretches.” Howe investigated the prison and published his findings in Nathan Hale’s Boston Daily Advertiser in 1841, causing significant controversy.⁴⁴

Dix wanted to know if the East Cambridge jail was an aberration or the norm for mentally ill inmates in the Commonwealth. She spent almost two years visiting jails and almshouses in the state, finding the conditions at varying levels of terrible throughout. She summarized her investigation and brought her findings to the Massachusetts State Legislature, in her address she rattled off the inhumane abuses at almost every holding house in the state:

I proceed, gentlemen, briefly to call your attention to the present state of insane persons confined within this Commonwealth, in cages, closets, cellars, stalls, pens; chained, naked, beaten with rods, and lashed into obedience!

⁴³ Osborn, “From Beauty to Despair.”

⁴⁴ Francis Tiffany, *Life of Dorothea Lynde Dix* (Boston; New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co.; Riverside Press, 1891), <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/3o6XF2>.

The State Legislature passed a bill that year to create the first state-funded home for the mentally ill in Worcester.⁴⁵ While there were other publicly funded asylums already in operation at the time, Dix's efforts galvanized a move toward institutional reform in place of the ad hoc system of the day. After success in her home state, she embarked on a lifelong career traveling state-to-state, duplicating her Massachusetts efforts — evaluating and studying the respective state mental health care system(s) and presenting her findings to legislative bodies, followed with a reasoned appeal for state-funded asylums. Dix's work was best understood as not constitutive of, but occurring amidst, a turn toward institutionalization. The mid-19th century was marked by a rapid rise in institution-building, be it penal, educational, or otherwise.⁴⁶

Over the next decades, virtually every state in the union had erected at least one central asylum. However, it was determined that each state should put an asylum in their geographic center to guarantee equal access, often times leaving the largest cities to fend for themselves because they were too far from the state center to send patients all that way.⁴⁷ In 1836, the New York State Legislature secured funding to erect the state asylum in Utica, over 240 miles from New York City, meaning that the state's most populous city needed to build its own asylum. The following year, on page two of the September 19 *Morning Herald*, one columnist implored readers to block the building of a municipal lunatic asylum on Blackwell's Island, between Manhattan and Queens, because the

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Gerald N Grob, *The Mad among Us: A History of the Care of America's Mentally Ill* (New York; Toronto; New York: Free Press; Maxwell Macmillan Canada ; Maxwell Macmillan International, 1994).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

penitentiary was already there stating, “We do not like the plan of locating the Asylum for unfortunate lunatics on the same island with the worst of malefactors.” The author was already hinting at the possible deleterious effects of any association between the respective institutions. Nonetheless, the asylum was erected and 50 years later Nellie Bly would report for *The World* the conditions in that place.

The massive asylum structures soon filled to capacity and within a short time of opening asylums were being expanded to meet increased demand. On the aggregate, asylums ballooned at a faster rate than the general population, which was itself exploding.⁴⁸ Explanations for the phenomena vary but fall into three basic camps; the environmental, the segregative, and the structural. The environmental explanation asserts that tremendous social rifts, at least in part, increased the need for social welfare services.⁴⁹ Another explanation, the segregationist take, claims that urbanization and the increased intermingling of social classes led to less tolerance on the part of the bourgeois and asylums helped to keep the “unwanted” out of public view while simultaneously the physical stature of the asylum served as a looming reminder to deviants to stay in order.⁵⁰ Still another, the structural view, finds that the mercantile capitalism of the 19th century eroded the traditional familial community that existed in generations prior, and the asylum became a clearing house for unproductive members of the labor market, at least one type of unproductive member at least.⁵¹ More recently, scholars have advocated for a

⁴⁸ Sutton, “The Political Economy of Madness.”

⁴⁹ Grob, *The Mad among Us*.

⁵⁰ David J. Rothman, *Conscience and Convenience: The Asylum and Its Alternatives in Progressive America* (Transaction Publishers, 1980).

⁵¹ Scull, “Madness and Segregative Control.”

hybrid explanatory model, curative/custodial, which at once acknowledges the progressive welfare efforts of asylum proponents (curative) and the social control/segregative (custodial) function.

State-to-state, asylums were erected starting in the mid 1830s; the institution instantaneously became fodder for the news. In the January 8, 1836 *Carroll Free Press*, Ohio state legislators submitted a 2200-word report on the soon-to-be-constructed state asylum. The front-page article went into detail about building specifications, including entryway dimensions, apartment window accouterments, and even the heating system:

Each wing will be heated by two Wakefield furnaces placed in the basements. From these, the heated air will be conveyed in flues, along the inner walls of the building, and discharged into the corridors of each story and from thence into every chamber, through an unglazed sash, placed over the door of each apartment.

The article described how such opulent accommodations would bring about therapeutic mental illness recovery, buying directly into the Dix/Pinel moral treatment mantra. This speaks to the belief of the time that a controlled physical environment was the primary tool in curing psychical distress:

But to render treatment of insanity thus successful, the patients must be entirely separated from their friends, and from all objects with which they are familiar. This can only be effected by placing them in institutions for that purpose, and entirely under the control of strangers.

The 1830s was also a crucial period for the press. Traditional newspapers charged expensive subscription fees leaving a large swath of the population out. Thus was born the penny press, cleverly named for its street sale price, significantly below the retail of

the traditional partisan papers.⁵² The penny press traded in “human interest” news stories meant to appeal to “everyone.” Sensationalism, scandal, and curiosities filled the pages.

However, the penny press was more than a gossip rag. The massive increase in circulation necessitated new printing technology to keep up with demand. By 1837, thanks to a new Hoe cylinder press, the *Sun* could print at 4000 papers per hour to keep up with its 8000-daily circulation, twice its closest rival.⁵³ Furthermore, successful penny papers were able to solicit enough advertising revenue that they could report more objectively on local happenings without the political constraints felt by the orthodox partisan press of the era.⁵⁴ The penny press was the first arm of the press to use the police station and local courthouse as regular sources for stories.⁵⁵ The papers became the voice of the working class, reporting on abuses against immigrants, minorities, and women. Wallach explains that the penny press was also challenging traditional notions of public and private.⁵⁶ The industry’s fascination with matters like sex and family affairs obscured the lines between the traditional public/political and the explicitly personal.

The phenomenon at work here, and what thematically links the insane asylum to the press, is that the two enterprises would both embark, in the coming years, into areas traditionally considered private; a community member suffering from mental illness

⁵² This passage omits a more complicated origin story for the penny press for the sake of expediency.

⁵³ Michael C. Emery, Edwin Emery, and Nancy L. Roberts, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media* (Allyn & Bacon, 2000).

⁵⁴ Emery, Emery, and Roberts.

⁵⁵ Rolf Lindner, *The Reportage of Urban Culture: Robert Park and the Chicago School* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁵⁶ Glenn Wallach, “‘A Depraved Taste for Publicity:’ The Press and Private Life in the Gilded Age,” *American Studies* 39, no. 1 (1998): 31–57.

became ripe material for the press and the public institution. The newspapers would report on all facets of the asylum: who was committed, the conditions of the facility, the budget, the larger societal of the causes of insanity.⁵⁷ The asylum, the proxy for mental illness writ large, was a usual theme in newspapers, and remained that way for over a century.

1840s, 50s, 60s

In the run up to the Civil War, the press continued its hurried advance. Steam ships, railroads, and the telegraph enabled the news to get farther, faster. Page sizes and numbers increased, as did the number of columns. Newspapers started to use grouping techniques to organize the universe of content, more frequently interlaced with illustrations and block printings as the years went on. The inverted pyramid technique came about during the Civil War when the national readership was voracious for dispatches from battles.⁵⁸

The fledgling mental industrial complex also experienced profound changes in the period, mainly in the way states handled admissions. State legislatures had begun to strip the power from asylum superintendents to deny admissions while making it easier to commit people. In fact, by the mid 1800s it had become a common expression to tell someone, “I’ll have you committed.”⁵⁹ Social disruptiveness became grounds for

⁵⁷ This was before medical privacy laws were enacted so full names and conditions were often printed.

⁵⁸ The inverted pyramid is still a foundational journalistic writing style, often times the first one taught in journalism programs.

⁵⁹ David Dowling, “Davis, Inc.: The Business of Asylum Reform in the Periodical Press,” *American Periodicals: A Journal of History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 20, no. 1 (2010): 23–45.

committal. In Georgia, for example, asylums were the go-to holding houses for people accused of offenses like filthiness, masturbation, and intemperance. The accused were often family members or close acquaintances of the accusers in these cases.⁶⁰

A philosophical shift had taken place during the mid-nineteenth century. If the Antebellum years were marked by institution building, the Post-Bellum years saw those institutions settled and expanded in size and import. Moreover, the notion of centralized government welfare had become doctrine. Effective or not, the insane asylum was the go-to social mechanism for the mentally ill, it had become synonymous with mental illness by the Gilded Age.⁶¹

Gilded Age

A testament to the critical and ubiquitous issue of overcrowding and lax admission criteria in the late nineteenth century, the *Eugene City Guard* reprinted a November 1885 *New York Graphic* clip decrying the state of asylum admissions, noting that people charged with insanity were comparatively helpless, no matter how sane they actually were.⁶² The importance of an article like this one is it shows that someone with access to the press in New York considered the issue serious, and the New York publisher concurred. The issue was universal enough that a publisher in Eugene found it salient enough to print the clip 3000 miles away from its origin. The salience may have

⁶⁰ Derek H. Alderman, "Integrating Space into a Reactive Theory of the Asylum: Evidence from Post-Civil War Georgia," *Health & Place* 3, no. 2 (June 1997): 111–22, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1353-8292\(97\)00005-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1353-8292(97)00005-1).

⁶¹ Grob, *The Mad among Us*.

⁶² *Eugene City Guard*, No Headline, November 21, 1885.

been because people in Eugene just liked to read about New York happenings, or because Oregon was experiencing similar problems. Lastly, that the choice medium for this contestation was the newspaper situates the crux of this study.

By the late nineteenth century, it was a well-known fact that lunatic asylums, while perhaps not complete failures, were performing below expectation. Yet, on the aggregate, they continued to grow. In 1890, only seven years after the opening of the Oregon State Mental Hospital in Salem, the *Oregon City Enterprise* reported that the facility needed to be expanded, again.⁶³ The author, trying to offer an explanation to readers, said, “The rapid increase in the number of patients is rather the result of the growth of our population than an epidemic of insanity,” harkening to the environmental rationale mentioned above for rapid asylum growth.

The latter decades of the nineteenth century also saw the growth of the psychiatric profession, which added an element of legitimacy to the asylum as an institution⁶⁴. However, the fledgling profession was far from unanimous on how to treat patients with mental health issues. Here I explore the troubles the psychiatric profession suffered in the Gilded Age.

The Lunatic Asylum and the Press; linked in public service

⁶³ *Oregon city Enterprise*, No Headline, January 23, 1890.

⁶⁴ Scull, “Madness and Segregative Control.”

Late 19th century Americans were afloat in an urbanizing landscape, seeking meaning outside of traditional religious mores.⁶⁵ Newspapers and advertisers were in the shared game of providing meaning and direction in the new city life. Citizens sought mental renewal to endure, and thrive in, “dizzying” metropolitan environs. Advertisers offered consumers a way to enjoy “more” life, to jump into the stream, as it were.⁶⁶ Dailies were the primary vehicle for producers to peddle their wares. Patent medicines, often ones that provided relief for mental ailments, were the biggest advertisers in daily papers.⁶⁷ But newspapers did more than showcase the advertisements; they too embraced urbanity and attempted to organize the jarring reality of cosmopolitan life. They used their pages to articulate and argue for their entrenched urban ethos; activist versus laissez faire city halls, for example.⁶⁸ Content groupings (public affairs, crime, religious life, etc.) helped to guide readers toward what was most important for them to know. The arrangement was like an urban marketplace, public affairs being the main draw for consumers.⁶⁹

Newspapers relied on the sensational in order to lure readers and advertisers. Sensationalism had the potential to draw numerous strands of city life together. For

⁶⁵ T. Jackson Lears, “From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930,” *Advertising & Society Review* 1, no. 1 (2000), <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/asr/v001/1.1lears.html>.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Emery, Emery, and Roberts, *The Press and America*.

⁶⁸ David Paul Nord, *Communities of Journalism: A History of American Newspapers and Their Readers*, Reprint edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

⁶⁹ Kevin Barnhurst and John Nerone, *The Form of News: A History*, 1 edition (The Guilford Press, 2002).

example, the scandal, or private affair made public sensation, would bring together otherwise disparate areas of public life attracting readers to the content.⁷⁰ For example, the “philandering politician” story would include content about electoral politics as well as bourgeoisie moral expectations for public officials. Similarly, a presidential assassination, like the 1882 murder of James Garfield by Charles Guiteau, gave newspapers a plethora of content areas upon which to draw: the heartbreak of a nation, the shifting of power in Washington D.C., and the “epidemic” of madness. Similarly, the asylum, as an embodiment of the moral and administrative character of the era, was a site where numerous newsworthy themes intersected: public finances, social welfare, medical science, madness and its commodity/curiosity value. Newspapers would report on asylums as part of their duty to their public, as part of a project to demystify urbanity while simultaneously tickling at the lurid.

In 1880, there were reportedly 40,000 American asylum patients and by 1923 that number shot up to 263,000.⁷¹ In this era, the newspaper industry was exploding. In 1870, there were 574 American dailies and by 1900, 2600 dailies with a circulation of 22 million.⁷² A basic search in *Chronicling America* between 1870 and 1900 shows how frequently the issue of insanity and the accompanying asylums were discussed in newspapers compared with other important topics. The findings show that “madness” was as salient a topic (876K mentions) as “murder” (898K) and “crime” (626K) and a bit

⁷⁰ Gretchen Soderlund, *Sex Trafficking, Scandal, and the Transformation of Journalism, 1885-1917* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁷¹ Sutton, “The Political Economy of Madness.”

⁷² Emery, Emery, and Roberts, *The Press and America*; Karen Roggenkamp, *Narrating The News: New Journalism And Literary Genre In Late Nineteenth-Century American Newspapers And Fiction* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State Univ Pr, 2005).

less than “Congress” (1.2M). However, searches for “lunatic asylum” and “insane asylum” netted another 100K instances. This demonstrates that insane asylum messaging was common in daily newspapers.

This project began by interrogating whether Gilded Age newspapers contributed to the stigma about mental illness. While stigma is a valuable analytic, the project has evolved to show how the press would leverage the insane asylum into a nearly ubiquitous content generator. The asylum, because it was a matter of public concern, gave license to newspapers to draw from almost every corner of American life in their reportage. This dissertation will show how reporters offered details from people’s bedrooms, living rooms, hospital rooms, and court rooms under the auspices newsworthiness.

My initial research suggested that metro daily newspapers framed the insane asylum as a hopeless public burden: ineffective, expensive, yet necessary. However, this project shows more than that. First, I find that the press did not operate uniformly in its asylum coverage practices. The *Evening World* was far more bent on individual and sensational stories while the *Chicago Tribune* leaned into politics and corruption. The *Statesman Journal* was more protective of its singular asylum than its print counterparts while the *Galveston Daily News* had a substantial amount of asylum stories, but the majority were pulled from the wire as opposed to being written in house. All of these findings will be explored in detail. Second, stories about the insane asylum did more than stigmatize mental illness. They worked to reinforce standing stereotypes about femininity and masculinity. The stories also presented mental illness as an almost unstoppable force, a public hazard that was partly explainable but also random and inevitable.

The press did more than simply stigmatize a disease, their work was more complicated and nuanced than simply that. By creating a series of reliable tropes around the asylum, the issue of mental illness became secondary. The illness was a ticket into the hospital where a whole series of issues were ongoing. In other words, the “cure” was worse than the disease, at least as far as those stories selected for this study.

Framing Analysis

This study employs a brand of framing known as sociological framing which focuses on the media messages and their characteristics. Iyengar, who combined attribution theory with framing analysis, demonstrated that news framing has a significant effect on the way consumers understand serious social issues like poverty.⁷³ Specifically, by using episodic (individual) and thematic (societal) framing manipulations, participants were heavily influenced in their perception of who was responsible for poverty. This project will also test for thematic and episodic framing in news articles because the tool will help to ascertain the primary story subject in a concise and clear way. Sociological framing has been used for historical content analyses to some degree. For example, a 2006 study used a framing analysis to show that the press didn’t actually start the Spanish-American War however did provide an “enabling environment” for the war.⁷⁴

This paper is influenced by a recent study conducted by Emma McGinty et al which looked into news framing around mental illness and gun violence and borrows

⁷³ Shanto Iyengar, “Framing Responsibility for Political Issues: The Case of Poverty,” *Political Behavior* 12, no. 1 (March 1, 1990): 19–40, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00992330>.

⁷⁴ John Maxwell Hamilton et al., “An Enabling Environment,” *Journalism Studies* 7, no. 1 (February 1, 2006): 78–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700500450368>.

generally from their coding schema.⁷⁵ The McGinty paper found that over half of the news articles they sampled linked mental illness to some sort of violent crime. Similarly, a Washington State University study found that most of the articles they examined linked mental illness to violence or dangerousness, and oftentimes incompetence was suggested as well. However, this project departs from those studies because it interrogates asylum coverage rather than mental illness as a standalone. I've found that the recent studies mentioned are missing critical elements like gender, race, geography, funding and internment rates. This study features these factors prominently as they are crucial to understanding the institution as a complicated and situationally contingent social apparatus.

The Press and Secondary Literature

I went into this project thinking that the news articles would reflect much of the critical scholarship surrounding insane asylums. That is, I expected to see more references to race and gender in the articles. Some scholars have shown how race, ethnicity, and gender were seen as predictors for insanity in the late 1800s. For example, physicians of the era routinely characterized women as unprepared to navigate the realities of marriage and motherhood.⁷⁶ Medicine at the time relied on the premise that many diseases were hereditary so there was an added pressure on women to be “fit” for motherhood and to not pass along diseases, including mental illness, to their children. As

⁷⁵ McGinty, Webster, and Barry, “Effects of News Media Messages about Mass Shootings on Attitudes toward Persons with Serious Mental Illness and Public Support for Gun Control Policies.”

⁷⁶ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Conflict in 19th-century America” *Social Research* 39, no. 4 (1972): 657.

such, there was a cultural incentive to commit women who suffered mania in order to remove them from the pool.

In another example, Blacks were also seen as unfit for participating in civilized society; some argued that biology predetermined Black people's inability to join in at a meaningful level.⁷⁷ The standing medical assumptions of the time posited that Blacks were not able to care for themselves after emancipation because of their "idleness and irregular habits" and that their powers of "resistance and endurance" were weaker than in the white race.

It would be one thing, and a significant one, to come out of the project by showing how critical studies into how mental illness and culture interrelated and that the press simply reflected those findings in news articles. However, and what is important about this project, the press operated in its own contextual universe. Often times broadsheets would be out of step with secondary literature. The dearth of reporting on Black and minority commitments in spite of their respective, and outsized, commitment rates was one such area that this project uncovered.

The newspaper was a predominant source of information and influence in its time. Understanding how the press reconstructed the insane asylum in its articles is a valuable and under-researched area of interest. This literature review establishes a snapshot of the critical literature regarding insane asylum commitment and it should be mentioned out front that many of the findings from the newspapers diverge from what might seem intuitive based on the literature.

⁷⁷ Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Univ of North Carolina Press, 1997), chap. 1.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Many of the scholarly works done on contemporary mental health stigma in the media use quantitative methodology, in an effort to create parity between contemporary and historical scholarship, this dissertation will also use a quantitative content analysis augmented with historical medical journal articles and state-level policy and budget documents.

The project looks at a few basic nominal/mechanical variables in the newspapers: publication date, subject, word count, page placement, wire usage, and framing. Beyond that, and this comes from preliminary readings of the data set, the dissertation also looks at more qualitative/conceptual variables like asylum jurisdiction, illness attribution, the profession of the subject, race, gender, and general themes in the articles. The data was collected and processed using Qualtrics.

Quantitative History

Any material containing an intentional message is a document. Newspapers are open-published, private documents because they are made for public consumption but privately owned.⁷⁸ Newspapers are crucial for historians, because they were not written with “posterity as an end,” in contrast to official documents created to govern the historical record.⁷⁹ Tosh and Lazarsfeld argue for a “commensurability” between critical

⁷⁸ John Scott, *A Matter of Record: Documentary Sources in Social Research*, 1st Edition (Cambridge, UK : Cambridge, MA, USA: Polity, 1991).

⁷⁹ Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*.

and administrative work.^{80 81} This study integrates functional metrics like wire usage and page placement with concepts taken from critical literature like gender race and class.

Stigma

Stigma is a powerful concept and one that can easily be over-generalized. Link and Phelan contend that stigma occurs “when elements of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination co-occur in a power situation that allows the components of stigma to unfold.”⁸² Newspapers *contributed* to the stigma as part of a larger interconnected social phenomenon. I used stigma as an entry point but found that the data suggest that the focal point change. The stigma around mental illness was pertinent and crucial to the project, however the richer findings show that the stigma was insidious and hard to pin down to one element or another. What came of this approach was a broadened sphere of knowledge that would be hard to reduce to mental illness stigma alone. Rather, as will be shown, mental illness was simply a vehicle that brought readers into a whole new theater of experiences in the form of the insane asylum and all of its functions: personal, economic, political.

Methodology:

Newspaper Materials

⁸⁰ Paul F. Lazarsfeld, “Remarks on Administrative and Critical Communications Research,” *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, no. 1 (1941): 2–16.

⁸¹ Tosh, *The Pursuit of History*.

⁸² Bruce G. Link and Jo C. Phelan, “Conceptualizing Stigma,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 27 (August 2001): 363.

I chose for this study to dive deeply into four distinct newspapers to establish my population. Those newspapers, selected from the archives of Newspapers.com were:

- 1) *The New York Evening World*: The newspaper had the highest circulation in the country, even outstripping *The World*. Furthermore, the archive had only limited access to *The World*. New York City was the largest and most powerful city in the United. The paper covered local, state, national and international affairs.
- 2) *The Galveston Daily News*: Galveston, with 29,000 residents in 1890, was the third largest city in Texas during the period of the study.⁸³ Additionally, the articles were more easily accessible from the database as opposed to those from Austin and Houston. The publisher also owned the *Dallas Daily News*.
- 3) *The Chicago Tribune*: Chicago was the second largest city in the United States at the time and was brought in to add parity to New York.
- 4) *The Salem Statesman Journal*: This newspaper was chosen because of its proximity to the state asylum and because it was the paper of record for the state capital. Also, being at University of Oregon, access to Oregon documents was a consideration.

Theme Definitions

While the basic definitions for this study are included in the codebook in the appendix, the themes should be outlined and defined here:

- **Economic**: *if the article is about economic issues, typically these would be articles that primarily discuss the finances of the asylum, or the finances of the state and*

⁸³ “CityPopHist Web.Pdf,” accessed July 4, 2018, <https://texasalmanac.com/sites/default/files/images/CityPopHist%20web.pdf>.

include the asylum as a major line item. This also includes those articles that present the reason for a subject's commitment as financial hardships or greed.

- *Political: if the article is about the politics of the asylum generally; it could be about a new policy being enacted, or about the partisan nature of building a new asylum, for example.*
- *Compassionate: the article is attempting to evoke sympathy for an individual or a group of people: those poor "unfortunates," for example. A rudimentary article about a committal would not qualify as compassionate. The article is trying to evoke sympathy for the individuals or groups.*
- *Legal: typically, about a court case, or official investigation. An alleged lawsuit or legal action would score in this category. So, the allegation and the actual litigation would count the article as legal.*
- *Sensational: for those articles that are curious, lurid, or salacious in nature; the inmate believes he is a piece of corn and is terrified of chickens. If the article mentions a delusion that could be considered real, then do not score as a curiosity. For example, if a person believes they are entitled to a fortune although they are destitute with no prospects, that would not qualify as sensational. However, if the person believes they are the president of the United States, that would qualify. Sensational articles should play up the sensory detail of the story.*

Sampling

In order to make sure my data was randomized, I employed a systematic sampling scheme. Specifically, I would call up the Newspaper.com archive for a specific

newspaper, set the time parameters, 1887-1895, and search for the keywords: insane asylum.⁸⁴ Once the search results came back in chronological order, often in the thousands and tens of thousands, I divided the number of results by whatever number would yield 250 articles evenly. For example, if 5000 articles came back for one newspaper, $5000/250=20$. At that point I used a random number generator between one and ten to determine the article at which I would start culling. Hypothetically, I would start at the sixth article and then pull every 20th article from that point in order to arrive at the desired number of sample articles while also covering the time period thoroughly. From the 250, I would pre-test each article for fit. Articles were thrown out if they did not have the insane asylum as a prominent subject, if they were advertisements, or if they were illegible. Standard news articles, editorials, letters to the editor, blotter reports, and almost all other forms of published news content were included.

The archive web service only yielded the page the article was on, so once selected, I then would use the cutout tool and cut a picture of the news story and make that into a pdf. From there, in order to further randomize the selected material, I had it arranged by file size and then re-numbered according to its city of origin, from 1-*n*. For example, The *Chicago Tribune* articles were numbered 1000-1220.

Newspaper Sample Significance and Intercoder Reliability

I wanted this study to have enough data so that the sample set from each individual newspaper as well as the aggregate population sample would each stand as significant, therefore I report here two different significance numbers.

⁸⁴ The years were selected for a number of reasons but one of the main factors was that all of the newspapers chosen had all of their issues available during those years.

- 1) For each newspaper, in order to achieve a confidence level of 95 percent with a margin of error of seven percent with a population of a standard 20,000, at least 195 articles would have to be pulled.⁸⁵ Therefore, I netted from each newspaper between 195 and 220 articles to score.
- 2) The total study sample population numbered 811 articles, giving the study set a 95 percent confidence level with a margin of error of 3.43 percent, above the requirements for social science research.⁸⁶

I used one outside coder in order to establish intercoder reliability. The test and codebook went through a series of iterations and improvements.⁸⁷ The project arrived at a percentage of agreement of 87 percent, sufficient for social science research as well.⁸⁸ The only variable where coding reliability fell below 60 percent was the dangerousness of asylums variable which came in at 40 percent intercoder reliability. As such, the findings based on this variable are exploratory and in future research the variable will have to be better defined and potentially split into two variables. The following lays out the percent agreement for key variables:

- 100 percent: date quarter, newspaper, page placement, commitment subject, operations subject, release/recovery, insanity as defense, false

⁸⁵ Social sciences typically accept a margin of error between five and ten percent.

⁸⁶ Numbers were tabulated using the social science statistical site Raosoft.

⁸⁷ Codebook and intercoder reliability spreadsheet available in the appendix.

⁸⁸ Daniel Riffe, Stephen Lacy, and Frederick Fico, *Analyzing Media Messages: Using Quantitative Content Analysis in Research*, 2014, 121.

imprisonment, commitment male, commitment female, theme economic, asylum capacity, too easy to commit, asylum corrupt, rate of insanity, false imprisonment

- 90 percent: subject policy, subject death, frame, ethnicity/race, theme compassionate, named, abuse/death
- 80 percent: subject investigation, operations female, theme political, theme legal, theme spectacle, asylum description, mental condition, committing party
- Below 80 percent: operations male (70%), tone (60%), danger (40%), recovery (60%), profession mentioned (60%)

Data Collection and Manipulation

While normally used for survey and questionnaire research, I found the software Qualtrics to be ideal for this type of data collection and manipulation. I generated a form that housed all of the questions and their associated responses for the inquiry. Qualtrics was a valuable and easily accessible tool for the study. The software worked on my laptop, phone and tablet.⁸⁹ Additionally, Qualtrics' back end provides a number of data manipulation and interpretation tools. The report feature was useful for drilling into micro-level data and generating informational graphics. The analysis tool in Qualtrics offered a drilldown feature that provided for nearly unlimited cross-tabulation capacities. For example, determining front page placement for economic stories in a given

⁸⁹ A PDF of the question form is provided in the appendix for reference.

newspaper would require a multi-level drill down. The statistics that I generated were descriptive (non-predictive) as this was a largely exploratory/explanatory study.

Additional Primary Materials

To add more context and detail to the newspaper analysis, this project also utilized primary data mostly from medical journals and state-level policy and budget documents. The *American Journal of Medical Sciences* was recently digitized and made keyword searchable so that resource was employed for a standalone chapter on the state of mental health care focusing mainly on the acrimony and inchoate nature of mental health care during the era. For information on government spending and policy, I gained access to biennial reports, gubernatorial reports, and legislative minutes from the various states.⁹⁰ Details from the government documents are peppered throughout the study and used for breakout sections on Illinois and Oregon.

Reporting the Findings

After collecting all of the necessary data and assessing the nature of the material, approaching the interpretation and reporting was challenging. The technique I chose, and the chapter outline that follows, was best-suited to answer all of the questions I laid out and allowed for me to include data and interpretations that I had not predicted at the outset.

⁹⁰ Even with the help of the research and government records librarian at the University of Oregon library, the state of Texas documents proved to be the hardest to obtain. Those documents, as opposed to those from other states covered in the project, were accessible only in person or with Texas University System access.

The first empirical chapter (Chapter IV) is the first of three at the core of this study, looks at the commitment story. Out of the 811 articles used for this study, 535 of them were about people being committed to the asylum. Within this chapter, I present findings that show who the newspapers covered, and the degree of detail published in a given story. This chapter highlights the race, gender, and profession of the subjects being committed as well as the mechanics of page placement, story length, and wire usage. Of special interest in the chapter is the idea that the newspapers were writing their ideal subjects into the articles as most people covered were middle and upper-class citizens and presumably White and native-born, which leaves out a majority of asylum commitment details.

The second empirical chapter (Chapter V) looks at operations stories, the second most common subject of the data set. Like the Nellie Bly investigation, these articles gave the reader access to the inner workings of the enormous facilities. This chapter demonstrates the way in which the asylum itself was represented in the press: investigations into abuse, allegations of political corruption, state and local policy disputes over the proper care and funding for the mentally ill. Chapter Six also examines the functional editorial choices like page placement and word count as well as the framing scheme employed in the selected data set. Moreover, the chapter elucidates a contrast in asylum reporting when articles discuss a person being committed versus a person who is already committed.

Chapter Six explores the themes of the articles in the entire study. Though I report on the themes in the previous two chapters, this chapter is where that really opens up. I elaborate on the notion that the press presents the asylum as subject to numerous loci of

power like economics, law, and politics. Beyond that, and somewhat intuitively, Gilded Age newspapers regularly published asylum stories with sensational details. The sensational elements could range from a minute detail in the story, to a full-blown story that played up the sensory detail throughout. What was surprising about the findings in this chapter, though, was the notion that newspapers occasionally would show compassion, they would implore readers to take pity, to connect with the subject. These stories weren't common but important to note in order to have a holistic and exhaustive view of the newspaper accounts.

The final empirical chapter (Chapter VII) is based on an analysis of medical journal articles and a smattering of medical conference papers. While this chapter does not specifically cover the newspaper accounts of the insane asylum, it lays the foundation for understanding the mainstream medical approach to mental health care. This information becomes more important as the subsequent chapters show that the press generally avoided almost all reference to the actual therapy taking place in the asylums.

The final chapter (Chapter VIII) presents the discussion and limitations of the project as well as pointing toward future research.

The appendix includes the formal codebook, the intercoder agreement spreadsheet, and the question form as used in Qualtrics.

CHAPTER IV

THE SYSTEM APPEARS TO BE WORKING

I expected to see blunter *sanism*, or open hostility toward the mentally ill. However, what became apparent was that the newspapers weren't merely echoing extraneous messaging around the asylums, they were operating in their own universe of information and chose to publish information that fit into that conceptual realm. Rather than illustrating how news articles reflected critical literature, this chapter explores a wider range of story characteristics and therefore presents a more accurate account of Progressive-era asylum related news.

Out of the 811 articles scored for this project, the most commonly published stories were neither about abuses within the asylum nor false imprisonment, although those were significantly covered in the time period. The most common story subject was the commitment story that documents people being committed to an asylum or having been committed at some point. These take up nearly two thirds (66%, n=535) of all asylum related stories. The news clips varied tremendously in size and style. Some were simply one or two sentences long and denoting the matter-of-fact event of someone being committed. This article, for example, with the simple headline "AN INSANE MAN," printed May 17, 1892 in the *Salem Statesman Journal* reads, "John Starbuck, who lives four miles over the river in Polk County, was examined here yesterday before County Judge Davidson, and committed to the asylum for insane. Starbuck is 48 years of age and is in sane through continued ill health."⁹¹

⁹¹ *Salem Statesman*, "An Insane Man," May 17, 1892.

While other articles would read more like novels, sometimes going on for thousands of words and featuring the literary flourish of popular fiction, this July 1893 *Chicago Tribune* wire article titled “ANGEL FOR A MENTOR” invests over 2000 words retelling the story of a woman who was sent to Dubuque, Iowa at the behest of an angel who writes poems through her. At one point, the article details her time in an asylum near her former home in Canada.⁹²

A woman who had a strange influence over the boy [her son] alienated his affections, and finally had her [the subject] put in the asylum. She used to look out of the windows of the mad-house and see her own home, where she lived so long and so happily, but she could get no word to anyone outside, and she had to wait for an opportunity. Then she gave herself into God’s hands and he sent her an angel that never deserted her. The angel opened the door of the asylum and she walked out.

The article also displays a couple of choice poems the woman/angel wrote and finishes by telling the reader the town was giddy about her being in their presence.

This chapter outlines the ways in which these commitment stories were written. Gilded Age newspapers, by and large, covered asylum business as a regular, often daily, staple of the news menu. Newspaper publishers had to make key editorial decisions when running these items: page placement, word count, identifying characteristics of the subject(s), committing party, and a range of other details. What unfolds from indexing these items approximates a list of news values concerning insane asylums under the specter of what had been referred to at the time as an epidemic of insanity.⁹³

⁹² *Chicago Daily Tribune*, “Angel for a mentor,” July 29, 1893.

⁹³ Briggs, “The Race of Hysteria,” 246.

The commitment articles, on average, featured males as their main subject (71%) from white or blue-collar professions (47%), presumably white and native born⁹⁴ (56%) who became insane from injuries (17%), personal loss or love (14%), substance abuse (13%), or stress (13%). Like the story covering the commitment of Wm. Chenowith in the *Statesman*, August 1891, that estimates the suicidal/homicidal man's insanity came as a result of "overwork and having been overheated."⁹⁵

And while the papers would go deep into areas like the supposed reasons for someone's mental illness, they mainly chose generic terms to describe the actual mental condition of the subject(s). In contrast, the medical world was working to better classify mental ailments, but most news stories would simply use the term "insane," veering away from actual medical terms like acute mania, or even hysteria, for example. In the following pages, I will explore these phenomena in order to explicate the content decisions of major American newspapers surrounding insane asylum commitment stories.

The first section will analyze some of the basic metrics of the commitment articles including word count, page placement and whether or not the story was locally sourced or pulled from the newswire. All of these factors prove just how significant the asylum was to the metro dailies.

The next section will go deeper into the content characteristics and explore the details about the subject including gender, profession, reason(s) for insanity, the theme and tone of the article, and the committing party. The second section will also cross-

⁹⁴ This project is taking a conceptual leap in assuming that stories that did not mention the race or nationality of the subject meant them to be white and native born. It is a logical conclusion that since so many articles did make sure to mention the race and or nationality of the subjects, that the ones that did not were implying white and native born.

⁹⁵ *Salem Statesman*, "A patient," August 18, 1891.

compare the data with state reports showing disparities or consistencies between what was being reported in the newspapers and what was being reported by asylum superintendents and state-appointed overseers. I will show that newspapers primarily left immigrants and minorities out of their commitment coverage in spite of evidence that members of these groups made up a significant portion of those receiving asylum treatment. While very few foreigners were featured in news articles about people committed to Illinois asylums, they made up almost a third of those committed. In a December 1891 article in the *Tribune* that focused on a number of papers read at an immigration conference held by the Medico-Legal Society of Chicago, one of the findings in support of restricting immigration was the overrepresentation of immigrants in state asylums.⁹⁶ One Dr. Dewey was reported as saying that while one in six Illinois residents were foreign-born, two fifths of the insane paupers were foreign, 36 percent at the main state asylum at Kankakee. Contrast that finding with only 16 percent of newspaper commitment stories that featured an immigrant as the subject.

Section 1: Basic Metrics

Front and Inside Page Placement

Of the 535 stories featuring asylum commitment as the subject, 18 percent (n=96) of those were printed on the front page. However, not all newspapers behaved the same concerning their front-page placement. For example, the *New York Evening World* had the highest share of front page articles (40%). The *Evening World* was a Pulitzer organ, and as such followed his edict for sensational stories that focused on individuals to drive

⁹⁶ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, "Restricting immigration discussed," December 6, 1891.

the narrative. Pulitzer wanted to revolutionize the newspaper business because he felt that it was in a doldrum.⁹⁷ Throughout this project, one will see evidence of the *Evening World's* more personalized narrative structure. This section will explore some of the attributes that delimit those articles selected for front page publication.

Like the commitment articles on inside pages, most commitment stories on the front page were between 50 and 200 words (44%), with shorter articles behind that (24%) and ones between 200 and 500 words just below that in proportion (19%). The smallest amount of front page articles by word count were those above 500 words (13%). The two biggest cities, New York and Chicago, made up the lion's share of lengthy front-page articles (84%, n=11).

The front-page commitment stories were predominantly episodic (99%) in focus, meaning that an individual(s), as opposed to the institution or larger social system, was the subject. Of those, stories about men made up more than two thirds. The theme sensational, or a news story that is mainly lurid and offers no real information to the reader besides curiosity, was the most common of themes making up more than half of the front-page commitment articles. Second most common were articles that were legally themed or discussed the commitment of a subject in legal terms, at about a quarter of the articles.

Given the numbers above, it would stand to reason that a commitment story would land on the front page approximately once a week during the late 1800s, and similar articles would appear on inside pages every other day of the week. This demonstrates how salient the topic really was. Moreover, nearly half of the front-page

⁹⁷ James Wyman Barrett, *The World, the Flesh and Messrs. Pulitzer* (The Vanguard press, 1931), 13.

commitment stories were pulled from the wire (49%) meaning that the newspapers were not only covering their local asylums, but that the topic of asylums was salient enough that newspapers would print another city's asylum news on their front page. One example is this November 1892 article on the *New York Evening World's* front page with the headline, "Ex-Commander Webb Insane."⁹⁸ The story came out of Topeka, Kansas where "Leland Webb, formerly National Commander-in-Chief of the Sons of Veterans, was declared insane yesterday after attempting suicide and sent to the asylum." Or the more curious case of a Michigan woman, printed on the front page of the *Chicago Tribune* in May of 1888, who "read the Bible constantly for six weeks. At the end of that time she grew violently insane," leaving behind a husband and three children when she was committed. This choice to publish the woman's commitment featured common front-page characteristics of the time at 52 words not including the headline, episodic in subject and thematically a sensation.

Section 2: Frame

Now that I have laid out some basic metrics about how newspapers organized their commitment stories, I will index the next batch of characteristics about asylum commitment stories. By looking at the frames used in publishing, it's possible to approximate who or what the newspapers saw as the accountable agent of any given story about commitment. A thematically-framed story would look at larger social structures and institutions as the main subject whereas a story written with an episodic frame would be portraying the individual as the accountable agent for the commitment. Given the

⁹⁸ *New York Evening World*, "Ex-Commander Webb Insane," November 1, 1892.

exponential rate of increase in American asylums and with official sources – medical professionals, state representatives – often speculating as to the reasons for such increases, I had estimated that a significant number of articles would be thematic in nature. That is, that newspapers would be printing speculation about, and explanations for, the rate of commitments. However, what the study found was that newspapers overwhelmingly framed their stories around the individual(s) being committed. In fact, 93.46 percent of all commitment stories were framed around individuals as opposed to only four percent that focused on institutions or social problems.

This section will look at the episodically-framed stories. In a subsequent chapter on operations stories, the thematic frame will feature more prominently. As it stands, though, the four newspapers chosen for the study, spread out across the states, behaved quite similarly in terms of their episodic commitment story coverage. There were no significant outliers among the papers with each of them between 92 and 96 percent of commitment stories framed episodically. Similar to other commitment story characteristics, the episodic stories were primarily about men (71%) and almost half fell under the theme of sensational (41%). It wasn't uncommon to see a story like this July 1888 entry from the *Salem Statesman* with the headline, "CRAZY MAN." The full article reading, "J.D. Smith, deputy sheriff of Baker county, arrived in the city yesterday morning having in charge for the asylum one Albert Carter, a young man of about 28, who is crazy on religion and who imagines the world is coming to an end."⁹⁹

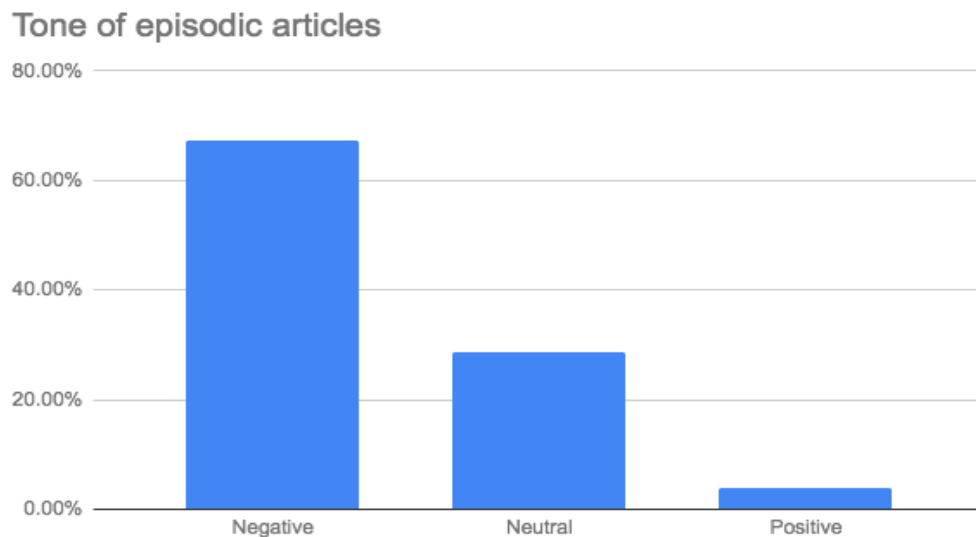
What this section uncovers is how newspapers of the era leaned on the individual as the primary subject, not simply the abstract "individual" as a concept but the named

⁹⁹ *Statesman Journal*, "Crazy Man," July 31, 1888.

individual whose personal details were common fodder for publication. Like the story cited above, where the man’s name and county of residence are listed as well the nature of his mania, newspaper stories about asylum commitments almost uniformly followed this formula. Of these stories, 92 percent name the committed individuals while 35 percent go on to identify the reason for the person’s insanity.

The tone of these articles was mostly negative, but not as high as one might assume at 69 percent. Another 29 percent were neutral in tone, meaning that the article recounted only the commitment action in a matter-of-fact way with no qualitative assessment of the individual or the asylum. An example would be this 1893 Galveston article, taken from the wire, about an 18-year-old Waco man named Charlie Vaught who was “declared insane by a jury this morning and will be sent to an asylum.”¹⁰⁰

In an 1889 address to the National Annual Charities Commission conference in San Francisco, Dr. W.W. Gooding commended the state of New York for being a



¹⁰⁰ *Galveston Daily News*, “Waco Local Items,” March 1, 1893.

national leader in its care of insane citizens. However, he conceded a certain degree of futility in his reporting a 48 percent increase in insane New York citizens over the previous three years compared with a general population increase of only 19 percent. The rest of the conference paper reads like a playbook for how states can follow New York's lead in preparing to take care of their respective indefinitely increasing insane populations.¹⁰¹

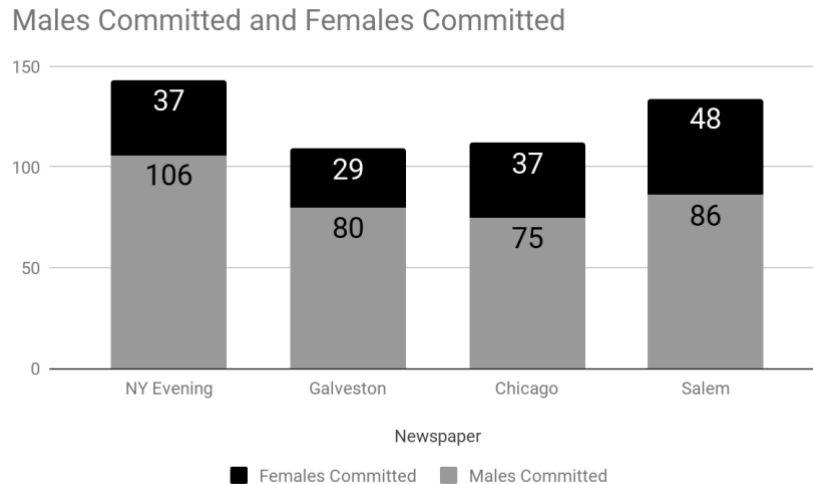
Newspaper framing conventions, which tended to rely on the individual narrative as opposed to more general framing, might have served the purpose of humanizing what may ostensibly have appeared like a continuous and faceless mob being committed to the facilities. The next section delves into what was written about who was featured in those individually-driven stories.

Section 3: Gender

Newspapers, by and large, covered the commitments of male patients more often than females. As shown in the adjacent table, the *New York Evening World* featured men as the commitment subject almost three times (male 106, female 37) as often as females. Galveston and Chicago published about male subjects more than double the rate of female subjects and Salem was just under that mark.

¹⁰¹ "Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction, at the ... Annual Session Held In ...," n.d., 65.

This section will look at the gender of subjects featured in Gilded Age news stories about insane asylum commitments and cross-compare those statistics with the respective jobs the subjects held (if mentioned), the attribution for their illnesses, tone, theme, and the diagnoses that the newspapers reported.



Of all the variables measured in this study, the one I anticipated having the most disparity between men and women would have been the tone variable. In other words, I had thought that the newspapers would have been more openly disparaging toward women subjects. However, that wasn't nearly the case. In fact, the average tone was nearly identical between women and the general population of cases, about 70 percent being negative and 28 percent being neutral with just over one percent being positive. Tone, though, isn't as fruitful as some other variable where there appeared far more variations between men and women. The most striking differences came in the variables of attribution for insanity, the subject's profession or marital status, the committing party, and whether or not the article was compassionate in its theme. The variations within these categories don't betray an explicit hostility toward either gender, per se, but do perhaps show how the newspaper used the stories about insane asylum commitments to advance

existing notions about gender divisions. The takeaways from this section show that it was more common for women to be committed by friends or loved ones, that women were described by their marital status whereas men were described by their professions. Newspapers featured reports showing that women's insanity was caused by personal loss and family history where men's insanity was most often caused by medical problems or financial hardships. Lastly, articles about women were more likely to be thematically compassionate or evoking pity for the subjects.

In November of 1893, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a wire story from St. Louis wherein a society woman, wife of an insurance man and daughter of Jerome Hill, the "Cotton King," was committed to an asylum after alleging that she had had a love affair with a Russian prince. The prince denied even knowing the woman while her friends and family claimed that their relationship was purely platonic. The news story explains her insanity "took the form of a craze for admiration," and that the prince when he addressed the woman "flattered her in his foreign way without, perhaps, meaning the slightest harm, the young woman's head was turned and she acted indiscreetly." The woman was ultimately committed by her father to St. Vincent's, a private sanitarium, to be "treated for what all her friends feel sure is but a temporary mental disorder."¹⁰²

The story about the woman, in which she is only addressed by her married name, Mrs. H.M. Coudrey, shares traits with many commitment stories in which women were the subject. While personal loss or love made up just nine percent of stories about causes for male commitments, a quarter of female commitment stories list love or personal loss as the reason for insanity. Attribution for insanity was a common topic in commitment

¹⁰² *Chicago Daily Tribune*, "Her Mind Gives Way," November 17, 1893.

news stories, in fact 35 percent (n=192) of commitment stories listed some cause for the subject's ailment. Drugs and alcohol, stress, and finances were some of the most common causes that newspapers listed as responsible for a person's mental illness, one article even named masturbation as the reason.¹⁰³ However, the number one cause of insanity for men was medical problems (19.85%), ranging from being kicked in the head by a horse to the flu to paresis. A November 1889 article titled "A Crazy" from the *Salem Statesman* covers a newspaper man, brought in by the sheriff, whose homicidal mania was thought to be "the result of sickness."¹⁰⁴ Later that month, the same newspaper documented the commitment of an Irishman who lost his reason due to typhoid three decades prior and had been for most of his adult life confined in spite of "good habits, the moderate use of tobacco, and good care."¹⁰⁵ The rest of the top causes for men's insanity were finances (13%), drugs/alcohol and stress (12% respectively) and religion (11%). In contrast, the attributions for women after personal loss/love were stress (16%), family history (14.75%)¹⁰⁶, and drugs and alcohol and medical issues rounding out the main attributes (11.48% respectively).

By looking at the attributions for insanity in this way, the newspapers begin to present a generally gendered view of the causes of insanity that only emerges by looking at the articles en masse. Men were often reported as becoming mentally ill through

¹⁰³ While it only came up in one article, masturbation was seen at the time as a cause of mania and in some cases was listed as the diagnosis itself. Masturbation was the second highest cause for insanity in the Oregon asylum during the era, behind intemperance.

¹⁰⁴ *Statesman Journal*, "A Crazy," November 9, 1889.

¹⁰⁵ *Statesman Journal*, "A Patient," November 29, 1889.

¹⁰⁶ Family history denotes that the cause of insanity was hereditary.

external forces like medical issues or financial hardships whereas women were often made insane through more internal or personal problems like lost love or stress or family history. What emerges is a normative view of the sexes framed within the stories of insane asylum commitments. A view that is only reified through the other characteristics of the articles. The next element to consider is who was doing the committing.

In 73 percent of the commitment articles (n=388) the committing agent(s) was listed in the story. The agent could be a physician, a judge, a police officer, or a family member. Most often, the committing party discussed in the stories was an agent of the law, either a judge or police officer. But there were some stark contrasts in who committed men and women. Authorities like judges and police officers accounted for over three quarters (76.45%) of male asylum commitments as opposed to just over half of female commitments (53.57%). At the same time commitments by friends or loved ones made up just over a third (33.93%) of female internment, more than double the percentage of males who were committed by friends or family members (15.58%). This distinction extends the framing of men as public beings whose ailments come from external factors and whose commitments come at the hands of public agents. Women were more private, their illnesses coming as a result of internal issues and their commitments executed by those in their private circles, more often than their male counterparts at least.

The public/private contrast is augmented when we consider the professions that newspapers listed for those that were committed. In the process of scoring the articles, I had found so often that stories about men being committed also listed the profession(s) of the men in question but tended to ignore the profession of the women listed, if indeed she

had one. In response I created a new variable specifically for stories about female commitments: wife/mother. With that new category added to the variable, almost half (49%, n=264) of the articles listed either the profession of the subjects or that they were a wife or mother. A September 1895 *Chicago Tribune* article encapsulates nicely a stereotypical story formula as it starts out with: “Mrs. Ettie E. Hulbert, wife of Prof. Eri B. Hulbert at the Chicago University, was declared insane of the County Court yesterday.”¹⁰⁷ The article later explains that she had recently returned from Europe where her children were attending school. The news story admits that she had been in ill health for several years prior to the confinement and would likely recover. Take this story and look at a typical story involving a male subject, same newspaper, November 1893: “John P. Eich, a well-to-do German farmer near Emington in this county, was taken to the Kankakee Asylum for the second time to be cured of insanity.”¹⁰⁸

Almost half of all female commitment stories (48.75%) listed the subject as a wife or a mother without any other details about the woman’s profession. The second most common “profession” for women (21.25%) and most common for male commitment stories (34.22%) was white collar, ranging from bankers to lawyers to heirs and heiresses.

“She is entitled to sympathy,” the *Statesman* wrote of a woman committed in March of 1891, “and it is hoped her insanity will be but temporary.” The article covers a woman who was in transit to visit her son when she was found at a depot in a “demented condition.” The story, like a number of stories about women, strikes a compassionate tone, explicitly invoking the sentiment from the reader. Some articles were less explicit

¹⁰⁷ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, “Wife of Prof. Hulbert Declared Insane,” September 4, 1895.

¹⁰⁸ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, “Farmer Becomes Violently Insane,” November 6, 1893.

about their emotional inducement. For example, a July 1891 *Evening World* article pulled from the wire covers the case of a nun who had recently died in Poland after a tumultuous sequence of riots and false imprisonment and finally a stint in the asylum. “Her sufferings,” the writer posits, “had rendered the poor woman insane.” Notwithstanding the casual diagnosis in the story the theme of the writing is compassionate.¹⁰⁹ Not many of the commitment articles, 15 percent (n=80), called for compassion, explicitly or otherwise, but of the ones that did, 37 of them were about women and 43 featured male subjects. By proportion, 23 percent of female subject articles, compared with just eleven percent of male-subject commitment articles, were compassionate in their theme. Ann Douglass Wood illustrates the insidiousness of the issue concerning pity and 19th century femininity. She explains that medical texts in the era would commonly explain female sickness as a result of being “unfeminine.” Douglass Wood points to the physician S. Weir Mitchell who wrote at the time that women were to be pitied, rather than scorned.¹¹⁰ This tonality seems to be present in the press as well.

Newspapers didn’t write their commitment articles with nearly any degree of open hostility toward men or women, but a deeper look into the figures shows that what the articles did do was delimit and codify the ways in which men and women came to be brought into the asylum system. The boundaries weren’t exclusive to mental illness, per se, but rather seemed to be derived from pre-existing social configurations that were then

¹⁰⁹ The tendency for reporters to include unattributed diagnoses was common and will be addressed more substantially in a subsequent section.

¹¹⁰ Ann Douglas Wood, “‘The Fashionable Diseases’: Women’s Complaints and Their Treatment in Nineteenth-Century America,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 4, no. 1 (1973): 37, <https://doi.org/10.2307/202356>.

applied to the asylum commitment transaction. In particular, the commitment stories selected for print were those that seemed to demonstrate the extremities of gender norms: the men were often made mentally ill through business hardships and women were made ill from private and personal affairs gone sour.

Section 4: Ethnicity

“In 1883, there were 5130 insane paupers in the State, of which 2,115 were foreign-born,” the *Chicago Tribune* reported in a December 1891 article covering a convention of policy makers. The story goes on “or while only one sixth of the inhabitants were foreigners more than two-fifths of the insane came from the last-named class. Thirty-six per cent [sic] of the patients in the asylum at Kankakee were foreign-born.”¹¹¹ The story then attempts to explain some of the reasons for the mass of immigrants in the state’s asylums: unfortunate circumstances at home, unrealized dreams, hereditary tendencies. Just a few years prior, the same newspaper issued a story similarly attempting to explain the phenomena, “Chicago is cursed with a specially large proportion of lunatics of European manufacture.”¹¹² The author hypothesized that perhaps the European countries of origin were casting off their insane cases because the fresh air of the United States could be therapeutic or maybe they just didn’t want the burden on their taxes.

Gilded Age asylum commitments had an underrepresentation of blacks but an

¹¹¹ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, “Restricting Immigration Discussed,” December 6, 1891.

¹¹² *Chicago Daily Tribune*, “NO HEADLINE,” December 29, 1888.

over-representation of white immigrants.¹¹³ Blacks were as likely as whites to suffer mental illness but often weren't given medical treatment due to their race, and thus three times less likely to be committed.¹¹⁴ The *Galveston Daily News* printed a wire story from South Carolina in June of 1889, one of the very few commitment stories in this study that mention Black people at all, where a "negro" man had attacked a woman of unspecified race and then fled. He was soon apprehended in a nearby town and transported to the state lunatic asylum. However, mid-transit, "a body of forty men took Caldwell from the guard and shot him to death."¹¹⁵ The story made no mention of whatever became of the posse that shot Caldwell.

Conversely, immigrant whites were slightly more likely to become insane than NBWs (Native born whites) and 1.6 times more likely to be committed to insane asylums. This was especially true for non-British immigrants like the Irish or Germans who weren't used to English customs (Maeda, 478). *The Salem Statesman*, in a March 1888 article, attempts to explain why so many immigrants were found to be insane. "There is little doubt that the increase of Oregon's insane has been due to the presence on this coast of this class of persons whose previous lives of dissipation and turbulence have reduced them to a condition of mind and body that is apt to end in insanity, but if a feather's weight of new trials, disappointments or dissipation is added to their camel's

¹¹³ Hiroshi Maeda, "The Discovery of Mental Hospital Patients: A Historical Epidemiology of Institutionalization in the American North, 1880–1920," *Social Science History* 40, no. 03 (2016): 471, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2016.14>.

¹¹⁴ Maeda, 471.

¹¹⁵ *Galveston Daily News*, "A Negro Lunatic," June 22, 1889.

load of present cares and sufferings in a strange land.”¹¹⁶

For this section, since the newspapers didn’t specify subjects as being white and/or native-born Americans but did mention the nationality or minority category of subjects in commitment stories, those stories that made no mention of the nationality of the subjects were indexed as white American subjects and those that had their nationality or minority category listed were indexed as such.

Of the 535 articles scored as commitment articles, just under 20 percent (n=105) of them mentioned immigrants as the subject of the article. Of those, the Western European demographic took up the lion’s share at 64.71% (n=66), with African Americans far behind (10.78%, n=11), Asian (9.80%, n=10) and Eastern Europeans (7.61%, n=8) and two Mexican subjects mentioned (1.90%). Of those articles, the framing was similar to that of the native-born whites (NBW) at about 90 percent episodic with the NBW at 92 percent episodic. Articles about minorities and international subjects also had a similar gender split to the NBW; 79 of the articles were about males and 26 of them were about females. Newspaper commitment stories about this population demonstrated similar priorities in several other categories of note. The attribution for immigrant or minority commitment followed the NBW population with medical being the top cause and personal loss/love being second and drugs/alcohol third. Additionally, the commitment stories featuring immigrants or minorities that mentioned the profession of the person were similar to those in the NBW batch with the top professions named in order as white collar, blue collar and wife.

One variable category where the study measured a significant difference in the

¹¹⁶ Statesman Journal, “The Increase of our Insane,” March 18, 1888.

treatment of international and minority subjects was in the themes; 23.53 percent of the articles about immigrants or minorities were compassionate in theme compared with 13 percent of articles in the general population. Furthermore, about 17.65 percent of them were legally themed compared with around 27 percent legally-themed non-immigrant stories. The last major theme disparity, sensationalism, showed 53.51 percent of articles about international or minority subjects were sensational stories in theme verse about 40 percent in the general NBW population.

In April of 1890, the *Galveston Daily News* printed a wire story from New York, a 500-word tale of the events leading to the commitment of an Italian hospital patient named Anton Peratz who attacked an orderly.¹¹⁷ “Peratz is a wild-eyed laborer, about 35 years of age, and is very strong,” the article describes the man who, the writer conjectures, was in such distress that he lost his reason and “the fiend in him was let loose with a tiger-like rapidity.” The story recounts a chase scene through the ward, the writer anthropomorphizing the mental illness, “His murderous rage seemed to buoy him up as he sprang in pursuit...the lunatic after him [the orderly] in hot pursuit, gaining at every spring.” The orderly barricaded himself behind a door which Peratz attempted to break down, “The rage of this Italian was that of a tigress.” After the patient gave up on his first victim, having given him a blow on the head when the tumult first began, he was tripped up and apprehended by medical staff, “The madman fumed and frothed at the mouth.” The story ends rather abruptly with Peratz being taken to the insane ward at Bellevue hospital.

If the newspapers of this study didn't accurately sample the immigrants and

¹¹⁷ *Galveston Daily News*, “A Run for his Life,” April 29, 1890.

minorities being committed by volume, they did tend to overemphasize two characteristics in this population: negativity and danger.¹¹⁸ NBW subject stories had a 65 percent negative rate and 32 percent neutral whereas stories about immigrants and minorities were 87 percent negative and only 11 percent neutral. Moreover, NBW subjects were listed as dangerous to themselves, others or both 32 percent of the time while non-NBWs were at 42 percent. Like the story of Anton Peratz, minorities were at times imbued with almost superhuman strength as a result of their mental illness. The *New York Evening World* reprinted a wire story out of Virginia in September of 1890 about a Black man named Henry Thomas who escaped from a North Carolina asylum and attempted to rob a woman at her home.¹¹⁹ He was later confronted by lawmen in the town where “The negro fought fiercely using his knife.” He took two bullets before jumping on his horse and attempting escape when “seven more balls were fired into the lunatic’s body.” The story ends with a three-word phrase, “He cannot recover.” It wasn’t clear whether recovery was intended to mean his life or his sanity but in this article, we have a picture of a raving Black man who was deemed a public threat and handled in a “fitting” manner, apparently. This story, like many others about immigrants and minorities is not offset by neutral and perfunctory stories of commitments like those stories about NBW subjects.

¹¹⁸ The information retained from the “dangerousness” variable is exploratory because the intercoder reliability for this particular variable (40%) was below social standards (70%).

¹¹⁹ *The Evening World*, “A Fight with a Lunatic,” September 29, 1890.

Benjamin Reiss posits that the ruling class in America held the belief that blacks were prone to insanity because the people hadn't been afforded the time to properly evolve from savagery and were unable to maintain their sanity in a highly civilized

A CRAZY JAPANESE —Officer C. A. Watson, of Portland, arrived in Salem last night with an insane son of Japan, aged about 26 years, with a name that sounded something like Phomson. The Jap was taken to the asylum and turned over for treatment.

society.¹²⁰ However, if left in their own “natural environment, blacks and other ‘savages’ were thought to be practically free from mental illness.”¹²¹ Reiss claims that this mentality lasted until well into the 20th century. Immigrants and minorities shared a commonality with the insane in that they were populations that “needed” to be mastered, to be controlled. The difference being that NBW subjects were treatable and able to be brought back to the fold with proper treatment whereas the other populations were largely unfit to adapt even after being constrained in a therapeutic environment.

The final major disparity this study found in commitment articles contrasting minorities and NBWs was the likelihood of recovery. Most articles, like the image adjacent to this paragraph of a February 1892 *Salem Statesman* article, made no mention of whether the committed individual was likely to recover or not (85% NBW, 80% immigrant minority recovery not mentioned).¹²² However, within the remaining stories,

¹²⁰ Reiss, *Theaters of Madness*, 943.

¹²¹ Reiss, 943.

¹²² *Statesman Journal*, “A Crazy Japanese,” February 28, 1892.

just three percent of stories about minorities or immigrants indicated the subject was likely to recover but eight percent of NBW commitment stories indicated a likeliness of recovery. Moreover, seven percent of NBW articles mentioned the subject was unlikely to recover while seventeen percent of immigrant/minority subjects were listed as unlikely to recover from their respective ailments.

Identity

Though it's been touched on in this chapter, this section will elucidate more details about the press practice of publishing identifying information about committed citizens. While 92 percent of committed subjects were named in the articles reporting on their commitments, more personal details were also often included. The quantitative portion of this analysis did not include prompts for details like the person's address, their business affairs, their relatives' names, or how much money they had on them when committed. However, these details were often published along with the names.

This brings to light an area for consideration that was not immediately clear until the analysis was well underway: privacy. By early 21st century standards, many personal details included in Gilded Age reporting might be seen as lurid, potentially pointless, and perhaps invasive. But another way to view the practice would be to see just how much privacy citizens could expect from the fourth estate; privacy is not a fixed set of standards but a byproduct of fluctuating cultural practices. The name of the subject, or their profession, was often just the most basic detail of a story. The additional information is often where the color of the story lies. The *Statesman* ran a June 1892 article headlined "A Sad Birthday" about a German-born farmer committed on his 66th birthday; his

insanity was due to a severe case of la grippe. The article includes the man's name, profession, nationality and his birthdate: for public consumption.¹²³ In the commitment of Mollie Harris, whose story ran in the *Statesman* in December 1888, the article tells the reader the name of the woman's husband, her age, and the approximate location of her residence.¹²⁴ ¹²⁵ While details about a person's residence or relatives might seem more relevant in stories that concern imminent public threats, personal details published in commitment stories don't have an immediate public service component. One factor that could help to ballast the press's proclivity to air those details was likely the fact the daily newspapers were the readers' main source for almost all public affairs. In that light, members of the public could be informed about the goings-on of relatives or other close relations that they would only have otherwise heard through hearsay. In this manner, the press was nimble enough, and prepared with enough detail, to supersede the in-person rumor mill and establish its prominence as an information source, even if that information barely rose to level of "hard news."

This site, where personal details are supplied in the execution of a public service, is one where the asylum as a tool for extending the press's reach becomes apparent. The seemingly banal particulars of a person's life really are not apt for the news. But once the asylum—the omnipresent public service/institution—becomes involved, the bland is transformed into the pertinent, the commonplace becomes the color. A woman, Mrs. Van Bodenstein, looking for her husband is hardly a news story. But when it comes out that he

¹²³ *Statesman Journal*, "A Sad Birthday," June 28, 1892.

¹²⁴ *Statesman Journal*, "Insane Through Fright," December 15, 1888.

¹²⁵ The location was pertinent because of its proximity to the site of the 1888 Chinese Riot in Downtown Portland, its traumatic effects were frightening enough to cause her to lose her reason.

occasionally becomes violent when drunk and has been three times committed to Ward's Island, and that he sent a letter to her informing her of his intention to go visit President Cleveland, then her address of "240 East One Hundred and Twenty-fourth street" becomes an important detail.¹²⁶

Even the physical countenances of subjects were discussed, and often helped to illustrate the character and tone of an event. The Reverend Doctor William Mitchell was described in a January 1891 *Galveston Daily News* wire report as "one of the finest specimens of physical manhood ever seen in Fort Worth."¹²⁷ But by the day of his trial for forgery he had deteriorated: "His eyes that used to glisten with beams of intelligence were now dull, and he looked from them on the floor with a vacant stare." The news story explains that his physical appearance "has created more sympathy than he ever had before," the same people that previously cried "'Crucify him' now look on this wreck with pity and compassion." He pleaded insanity to the forgery charges, and the article all but assured the reader that a reasonable person would have found him insane rather than patently guilty. Again, seemingly extraneous details, this time of a person's physical appearance, are given life and thrust into roles of prominence once the specter of the asylum is introduced.

The asylum, as it grew from a municipal to a county to a state institution, was virtually universal in American life. The press invoked its watchdog role to cover the burgeoning public service and in so doing found justification to publish almost any manner of personal minutiae fit enough to make print. Through publishing extensive

¹²⁶ *The Evening World*, "Going to Washington and Crazy," November 16, 1887.

¹²⁷ *Galveston Daily News*, "Sad Spectacle," January 28, 1891.

personal commitment details, the press transmuted the private into the public, blurring the lines between the two.

Death: The Final Strand of Agency

Nellie Bly opined, as she was being released from Blackwell's Island in late 1887, that the horde of remaining patients were suffering a "fate worse than death;" that to be committed was to enter into an impassable gauntlet. There was a shame in being committed. An August 1887 wire story from New York City in the *Chicago Tribune* covered a mother-daughter suicide pact. The detectives uncovered a letter "bespattered with blood" that said, "they both realized that they were becoming insane, and preferred death to the madhouse."¹²⁸ The shame resonated beyond the patient to the family and other relations. Five months after the aforementioned article, the same paper tells of a Texas man who went missing for years, presumed dead, only to turn up enraged to find his wife remarried. The friend who originally told the woman of her husband's death "thought he was doing a humane act, and that she would rather know that he [the husband] was dead than to think him insane."¹²⁹ The man had been recently released from the asylum at Austin. In 1889, the *Galveston Daily News* ran a front-page wire story of a Philadelphia woman who allegedly murdered her husband.¹³⁰ Mrs. Harriet Burrow refused counsel because her only legal defense was the insanity plea and she "prefers the gallows to the insane asylum." These stories show, in some cases, death was preferred to

¹²⁸ *Chicago Tribune*, "Preferred Death to the Asylum," August 21, 1887.

¹²⁹ *Chicago Tribune*, "A Texas Romance," January 30, 1888.

¹³⁰ *Galveston Daily News*, "Mrs. Harriet Burrow," January 3, 1889.

the asylum. Death was the last fiber of agency before the individual was brought into an environment where they were no longer social subjects, they would become asylum subjects according to newspaper coverage.

CHAPTER V

THE SYSTEM APPEARS TO BE BROKEN

By 1887, asylum pioneer Dorothea Dix had spent over four decades as the nation's most vocal and well-connected proponent of insane asylums. She and a group of advocates went from state to state, and even to American territories, to convince legislatures to house their insane in hospitals meant for their care, not jails and almshouses where the mentally ill would merely wither away. Because of her work, most states in the union had at least one, and many had numerous asylums for the insane. However, hers was not an unqualified success. By the time Dix passed in July of that year, many insane asylums had deteriorated in form and function. Moral treatment started as a high-minded humanitarian project, but eventually gave way to custodial care. Insane asylums were known, in varying combinations, for patient abuse, corruption, and unsanitary and inhospitable conditions. Three months after Dix's death, another pioneering woman entered the fray to expose the abuses in a system meant to alleviate those exact abuses.

“In the afternoon Dr. Field came and examined me. He asked me only a few questions, and one that had no bearing on such a case. The chief question was of my home and friends, and if I had any lovers or had ever been married,” New York World investigative reporter Nellie Bly wrote of one of her interactions with an alienist before she was formally committed. “Then he made me stretch out my arms and move my fingers, which I did without the least hesitation, yet I heard him say my case was hopeless.”¹³¹ Her legal name was Elizabeth Cochrane, but she told the authorities that her

¹³¹ Nellie Bly, *Ten Days in a Mad-House* (Rockville, MD? A Nellie Bly Book, 2012).

name was Nellie Brown and told the staff and fellow patients in the Blackwell Insane Asylum in New York City that her name was Nellie Moreno. Bly wanted to cloak her pseudonym, and her face, from other reporters and police officers who might recognize her as the stunt reporter for the *World*. She managed to relatively easily get herself committed into the Blackwell halls. It was only after her lawyer friend had convinced the superintendent that he had arranged for private care for her that the asylum executive agreed to her release. “Sadly I said farewell to all I knew as I passed them on my way to freedom and life, while they were left behind to a fate worse than death,” she wrote as her liberation was being processed.

The 10-column installment series titled “Behind Asylum Bars,” that subsequently became a book, was enough to trigger a grand jury investigation into the asylum and its practices. Ultimately, another million dollars was moved into asylum resources and a handful of new practices were implemented to ensure humane treatment of the patients. On October 10, 1887, in a bit of cross-promotional work, a report in the *Evening World* offered a synopsis of Bly’s articles and some editorializing about the asylum practices in general: “It demonstrates how easily sane persons may be subjected to a fate the most horrible the human mind can conceive.”¹³² While Bly’s stunt was reported on nationally, this study finds that the exposé did little to change the actual formula for coverage or content that newspapers published concerning asylum operations.

Bly’s investigation would qualify as an operations article. Operations was the second most popular subject for insane asylum coverage in the period (n=237) and the range of content included, but was not limited to, exposing abuses. If the previous chapter

¹³² *The Evening World*, “Search for the Sane,” October 10, 1887.

that focused on commitment articles considered published details of people being brought to the asylum, this chapter looks at the stories about what happens once inside. The content ranges from abuse stories, to holiday parties to new superintendents being selected. Reporters had access to almost unlimited minutiae concerning asylum operations.

The previous chapter found an overarching theme in newspaper coverage: that in the face of what may have been seen as a swell of insanity in the United States, the asylum system was working. In other words, people were being removed to the appropriate facility once determined insane. However, those articles were almost bereft of any information about what happened next. This chapter finds that the articles covering the inner workings of asylums show a system that was largely broken. Be it through details of corruption, unsafe or unsanitary conditions, or just disparaging prose, newspapers typically found the internal workings of asylums to be unsavory. That general observation, as the chapter explores, does vary to some degree depending on the newspaper in question.

Another finding of this chapter is that the newspaper reports examine an almost unlimited array of asylum events but never actually discuss the process of therapy and recovery. As a matter of fact, the idea of recovery is rarely brought up at all. As if the “healing” part of the asylum was simply a byproduct of all of the other functions, executed to varying degrees of success. It might be that because the burgeoning field of psychiatry was in disarray, as this chapter will also explore, that newspapers found the actual therapeutic part of the asylum to be too arcane or disjointed. But that didn’t stop the publishers from running other stories that may have been equally as tenuous. This

study is not perfectly suited to draw an empirical answer as to why newspapers kept the medical function of the asylum at arm's length but contributes to the literature that this gap persisted and contradicted general press practice.

Basic Metrics

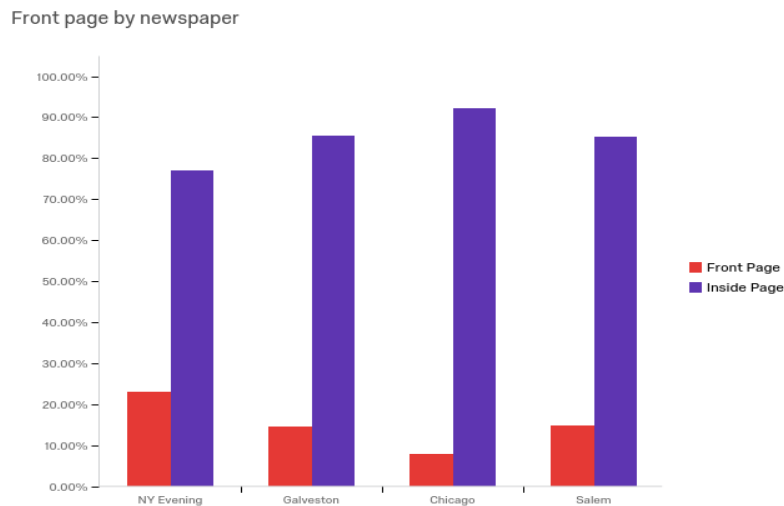
This section will explore some of the more mechanical functions of the press concerning articles that covered asylum operations like page placement, wire story usage and word count. What comes to light in this section is that selecting a diverse array of newspapers shows that they didn't all pull from the same playbook. While there are numerous commonalities, there is also an array of areas where the publications diverged. This section will explore the mechanics of the most significant metrics while focusing on those papers that were noticeably out of sync with their counterparts.

Front Page Placement

Similar to the placement of commitment articles, newspapers tended to print most of their operations stories on inside pages. Overall, just over 14 percent (n=34) of operations stories landed on the front page. *The Evening World*, like it did with commitment stories, had the highest rate of front page operations clips at 23 percent (n=12) compared with the rest that had no more than eight front page commitment articles. *The Tribune*, however, had the least front-page operations articles (n=6) but had the most operations stories overall with 76 compared with the other three newspapers which all ran between 50 and 60 operations stories. So, while the *Tribune* prioritized page

placement less so than its counterparts, the paper found the topic to be the most salient overall.

December 1887, just two months after Nellie Bly’s investigation, the *Evening World* printed a front-page story with the headline “Charges of Ill-Treatment.”¹³³ The subject of the article, James W. Foulk, was suing the Bloomingdale Asylum for \$20,000 for his being “shamefully treated” while an inmate. Before getting to the nature of the charges, the paper printed that he hallucinated “he had settled the difficulties between the German and French armies.” With that detail established, the story then proceeds to list some of the alleged abuses including being jumped on and having water thrown on him, among other items. The story ends somewhat inconclusively with the jury unable to reach a decision and the asylum attendants denying all of the charges. This type of story, as shown below, is a good representation of many front-page operations articles.



A partial trend emerges with regards to which stories were placed on front pages. Article length was pretty evenly distributed with 17 articles, 50 percent, between 50 and

¹³³ *The Evening World*, “Charges of Ill Treatment,” December 21, 1887.

200 words, seven articles between 200 and 500, and five articles respectively less than 50 and more than 500. This fits in with other findings in the study, that the most common word count is between 50 and 200 words; 46 percent of operations stories overall were between 200 and 500 words. Operations articles feature two main types of subjects: patients and personnel. *The Evening World*, which had more front-page operation placements than its counterparts, had the most front page mentions of male and female personnel: 12 each. The themes of the front-page articles, while not mutually exclusive, skewed toward legal (n=13) and sensationally themed articles (n=14) and the other three categories, political (n=6), compassionate (n=5), and economic (n=4) were less prominent. This finding also holds true among non-operations stories so there appears to be a newspaper bias toward stories that were either about investigations into the asylum and habeas corpus procedures or oddities and catastrophes. The tone of front page operations articles skewed toward the negative (n=21, 62%), with neutral articles (n=9, 26%) and positive articles the least common (n=4, 12%).

Wire Usage and Word Count

This section looks first at some of the basic mechanical choices that the newspapers made beyond page placement. An interesting trend I discovered is that the newspapers often operated with significant degrees of similarity in terms of wire usage, word count, content choices, etc. but often one paper would be the outlier in many of the categories. For example, when looking at wire story usage in operations stories, this study finds that 65 percent of newspapers preferred to generate their own content about asylum operations. Taken together, papers chose to publish more than a third (n=84) of their

operations stories from wire articles. However, the *Galveston Daily News* was almost opposite as they pulled 67 percent of their operation stories from the newswire. Galveston was unique among its counterparts because the city didn't have its own municipal asylum and the closest state asylum in Austin was over 200 miles away. On the other hand, the Salem paper had a state asylum right down the street and New York and Chicago had municipal and state facilities nearby and fleets of correspondents at hand. The commonality here, and what I can ascertain from the data about wire usage, is that the papers found it paramount to have content about the internal workings of asylums. Moreover, it was so important to have asylum operations articles that the one paper that didn't have a local asylum pulled the stories from elsewhere. The small but significant detail about wire stories demonstrates how salient the operations story was as a topic for the era's newspapers. It wasn't always important to have direct access to the subject(s) of the stories, but it was important to publish something compelling from this well. Looking at it another way, it was through the wire technology that newspapers were able to stay in formation with other newspapers.

Looking a bit deeper into the types of news stories selected from the wire elucidates the differing values of the newspapers in the study. For example, while Galveston pulled the most wire stories, the most common themes of those stories were either compassion or sensation, or both. Like a May 1890 story, originating from Utica, NY, about an asylum fire where "One imbecile was scared *into* her senses by the fire...and roused the keeper's wife from slumber, thus saving her life."¹³⁴ Conversely, the *Chicago Tribune* mainly chose stories that were legal, political, or both, from the wire. In

¹³⁴ *The Galveston Daily News*, "The Asylum Fire," May 10, 1890.

a March 1889 article published on page five under the section heading “General Political News” the story covers an Indiana asylum treasurer charged with embezzlement.¹³⁵ The story made sure to point out that the treasurer was a Democrat, a theme that this paper will explore later on.

Another metric for the salience of an issue is article length. The longer the article, the more detailed the story and ostensibly the more labor intensive to produce. Of the 237 operations articles, only 35 clips or 15 percent, were over the 500-word count with some reaching into the thousands, covering entire pages. The long articles were mainly negative in tone (n=21, 60%) and about a quarter (n=9) being neutral in tone. Here the study finds another regional discrepancy in press performance. In his book, *Devil in the White City*, Erik Larson explains that Chicago was not necessarily a windy city, per se, but that it had a reputation as a milieu for “long-winded” politicians.¹³⁶ *The Chicago Tribune* published almost half (n=17) of the long articles, and 29 of 68 articles 200 to 500 words in length, and most of them were either political or legal in theme.¹³⁷

On the other side of the word count spectrum, an even smaller portion (n=26, 11%) of the operations articles were less than 50 words. These articles were typically bundled with daily happenings or other blotter type material, they would occasionally be dressed with headlines but seldom got subheadlines or decks. The usual fare for articles

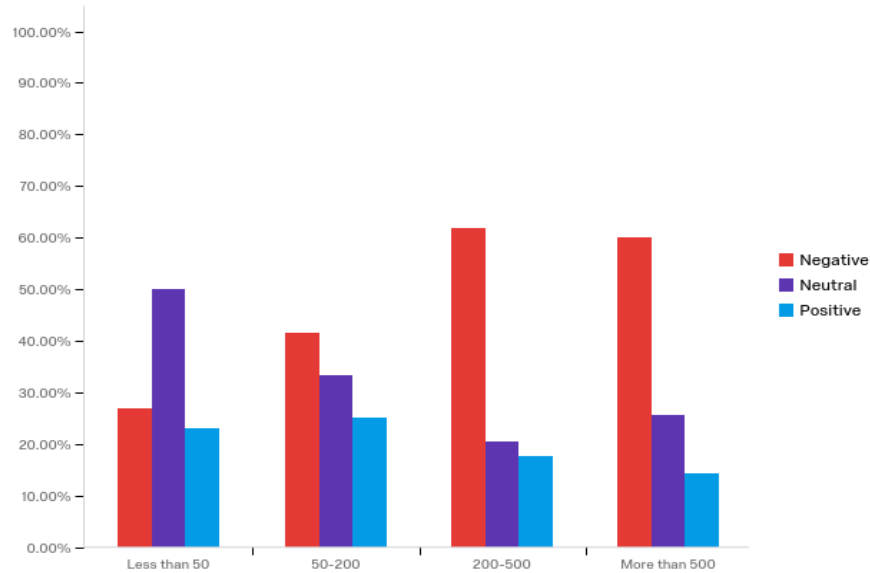
¹³⁵ *Chicago Tribune*, “The Treasurer of the Indiana Insane Hospital Charged with Embezzlement,” March 16, 1889.

¹³⁶ Erik Larson, *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair That Changed America* (New York: Vintage, 2004), chap. 1.

¹³⁷ This project will take up the Chicago political theater in another section, but it is fitting to mention here that the paper was likely playing to its Republican base during a time of intense partisan vitriol.

this short would be updates to larger threads, or personnel matters. Predictably, Chicago had the fewest short articles (n=3) while Galveston had the most (n=9). What stands out

Operations-Tone and Word Count



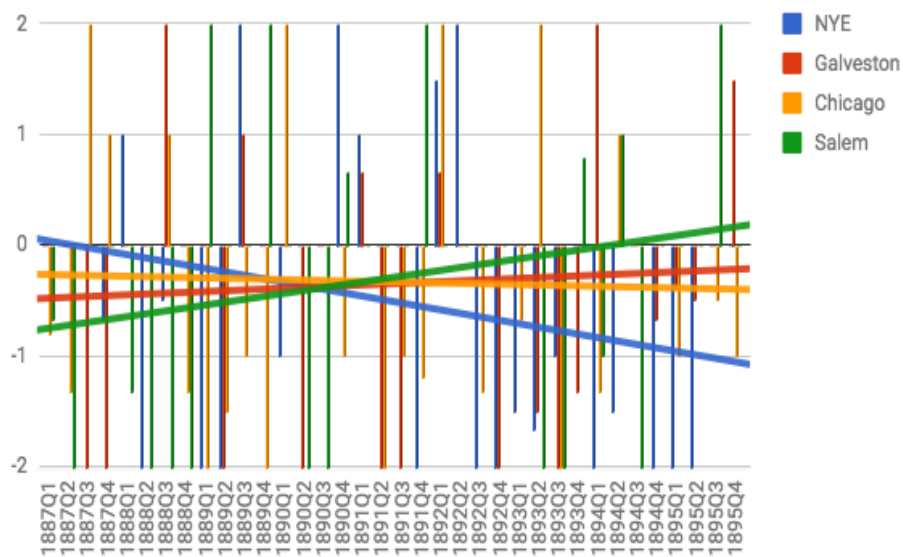
in this micro data set is the tone of the shorter articles, bucking the aggregate trend toward negative articles. A full 13 (50%) of the short operations articles were neutral in tone, most of which were from Galveston, and almost a quarter (n=6, 23%) were positive in tone. An article like the following from Galveston in January 1894, is symbolic of the tone and character of a short article: “The introduction of electric currents [for lighting] in the insane asylum at Cincinnati is working a wonderful improvement among the patients.”¹³⁸ Granted, the referenced article gives almost no context, but it conveys a small slice of good news about an asylum over one thousand miles away from Galveston. By looking at the short and long articles, this project can make the assessment that newspapers favored longer, more detailed stories about insane asylums in spite of the

¹³⁸ *The Galveston Daily News*, No Headline, January 31, 1894.

burden on resources. Also, as the adjacent table demonstrates, the tone of the articles skews toward negative as word count increases. This phenomenon is compounded by the fact that the large majority of operations articles were between 50 and 200 words (n=108, 46%) or 200 to 500 words (n=68, 29%). Thus, newspapers of the time prioritized stories that were more informative but also those that painted the asylum in a negative light whether those stories were about abuses, deaths, fires, investigations or other critical angles. The disparity here is that there was indeed a wealth of material that was either positive, or at least neutral, but wasn't nearly as prominently published.

Here is an area where casual and often uninformed opinions start to bear out in the data. The assumption I have encountered as this project has progressed is that asylums were houses of horror, rife with abuse. However, the lingering concern I have with that idea is the degree to which it is a product of media coverage as opposed to the reality of the institution. This isn't a question that the project is prepared to answer but will be alluded to along the way. What follows is a look beyond the mechanics of the articles (page placement, word count, wire usage) into the content of the operations stories (themes, subjects, people). What emerges from the data is that while the elements of the content may change, be it a commitment or operations article, the negative overall tone remains a constant. Though it does tend to differ based on publication and time.

OPS Tone Time Comparative



The Chicago and Galveston newspapers tended to maintain a consistent tone concerning operations articles over the course of the period 1887-1895, both hovering around -0.3 and -0.4 (scaled from -2 to 2) averaging -0.33 in Chicago and -0.35 in Galveston. What stands out when looking at the tone over time were the two other newspapers which basically switched places over the nine years. *The Salem Statesman*, which functioned largely as a mouthpiece of the Republican state representatives, started its coverage rather negatively on average with an opening year tone average of -0.67 whereas *The Evening World* was at just about 0 in the opening year. As time went on, the Salem paper was the only one in the study that closed out the period on a neutral-skewing-positive note. In contrast, the New York paper finished out the most negatively with a final yearly average just below -1 . Overall, Salem had the least negative tone score at -0.29 with New York tallying the highest negative tone at -0.51 as shown in the corresponding graph. So, while there was a consistent tone on average, this data show that there wasn't a one-size-fits-all

model for coverage. What the study will elaborate on in a subsequent chapter is some of the context that might help to explain these differences in coverage tone.

Salem and New York were operating under entirely different circumstances. New York State was undergoing a protracted battle between the state and municipal governments and one of the biggest points of contention was control over the insane asylums. The state wanted to either take over municipal asylums or move those patients to existing state facilities. So, there was vitriol coming from both camps amidst continuing humanitarian concerns within the asylums. In Oregon, the state asylum was relatively new, having only opened in late 1883. The state government would use the “efficiency” of the institution, among other public relations efforts, to try and incentivize new residents to emigrate to Oregon. These brief snippets of context will be more fully fleshed out in the next chapter but are used here to elucidate some of the background that might help explain how the tone of newspaper coverage was related to outside forces.

Framing in Operations Articles

Just over a year after Nellie Bly’s investigation, things seemed to be getting worse for asylum inmates in New York. According to a November 1888 article pulled from the wire and published in the *Chicago Tribune*, “The Kings County Insane Asylum at Flatbush is frightfully overcrowded.”¹³⁹ The article discusses a series of inhumane conditions before making a call to action to close the story, “A change from this awful condition of affairs will not come until the people of Brooklyn compel the public authorities to stop quarreling and attend to business.” This story, like the majority of

¹³⁹ *Chicago Tribune*, “They Live in the Cellar,” November 12, 1888.

operations articles, was framed thematically (n=144, 61%), or didn't have a specific person on whom it focused but rather focused on public bodies or societal trends as its subject. This statistic shows an intuitive shift in framing approaches depending on the subject matter; the majority of the commitment articles were individually focused, or episodically framed. I say an intuitive shift because when the gaze was set on the inner workings of the asylum, often that narrative would include larger forces than the more individual and transactional nature of commitment stories. The operations articles were doing a different, but complementary, kind of work. If the commitment stories were serving as grooming tools for readers to understand how insanity could happen and potential ways to avoid it (and thus internment), the operations stories were able to serve as a tool to criticize varying forces in the public sphere including elected bodies, appointed committees and voters. While the framing may have differed based upon the content, the two narrative techniques helped to position the newspaper as a moral center for individual *and* public/political conduct.

While the bulk of operations articles were thematic, there were still a significant number of episodic operations stories published (n=53, 22%). In February of 1891, the *Tribune* published another one from the wire, this time from Kalamazoo, Michigan.¹⁴⁰ A patient was killed, unintentionally, by being given a bath in scalding water. The article does make a brief mention that the patient needed several baths per day¹⁴¹ before describing how the “skin had peeled off her back, feet, and hips.” She was beyond medical help by the time the doctors got to her. The Kalamazoo tragedy coverage is

¹⁴⁰ *Chicago Tribune*, “Scalded a Patient to Death,” February 5, 1891.

¹⁴¹ A reference to the popular hydrotherapy practice that will be elaborated upon below

symbolic of a distinction in overall tone between episodic and thematic operations articles. While a little more than a third (n=55, 38%) of thematic operations articles were negative in tone, almost two thirds (n=34, 64%) of episodic operations articles were negative.

In addition to variations in frame tonality, yet another regional difference emerges from the data concerning framing, with the *Evening World* a bit of an outlier. While the three other newspapers published between 59 and 68 percent of their operations stories thematically, the *World* was only at 46 percent. On the other side of that data, the New York paper's operations articles were 37 percent episodic while the next highest paper only had 24 percent episodic operations articles. What this means is that the *Evening World* was again out of sync in terms of what may appear to be conventional practice. This may have been due to the fact that the Pulitzer brand was more focused on individual narratives. The Pulitzer vessel was more likely than its contemporaries to publish stories that focused on individuals. From a journalism studies perspective, this is important because while the *Evening World* had a unique approach to asylum coverage, it also had the highest circulation rate of any paper in the nation. So, this data demonstrate that circulation isn't always the most accurate barometer for general press practices, at least as far as how the newspapers covered one of the most powerful and important institutions of the era.

What's been established thus far in the chapter are the general and mechanical observations about asylum press coverage: frame, tone, page placement, word count and wire usage. What follows in this next section are findings related to the details of those stories: asylum capacity and description, individual subjects, and stories about recovery.

Content Characteristics: What the newspapers discussed

This study sought to discover how newspapers correlated with popular ideas about the insanity epidemic and asylum practices. In other words, if the typical public insane asylum is held in the public mind to be a place of horror and inhumanity, did newspaper coverage generally align with those tropes or did newspapers offer alternative narratives? In order to answer those questions this study analyzed how newspapers covered crowding, how they generally described the asylums, who they featured in operations articles and the type of description those people were given, and whether there was a pocket of stories that covered recovery. The findings show that the details of asylum operations coverage tend to align with what might be characterized as commonly held beliefs. Newspapers typically favored stories that showed asylums as inefficient, or dangerous or crowded. However, there were flashes of content that suggest some balance in the coverage. For example, there were positive stories about things like social dances at asylums or baseball games between patients and local citizens. The operations coverage wasn't an unmitigated torrent of gloomy stories, but readers were far more likely to encounter them than otherwise.

Capacity Assumption: Asylums were Overcrowded.

True, According to the News

American asylums in the late 19th century were at full tilt, with the institutions en masse scrambling to expand with no foreseeable end to the patient influx. An April 1887 article from the *Salem Statesman*, while less than 100 words, closes saying “The new

wing that will be put up this season will have to be followed with still another before too long.”¹⁴² The patient count according to the article was at 475. To put that in context, the original facility, only opened four years prior, was meant to hold about 300 people.

Of the 237 operations articles, only 18 percent (n=42) actually spoke to the capacity of the asylums directly. However, 93 percent of those stories, like the one in this passage, mentioned asylums as being full, crowded, or needing expansion. This study was positioned to score articles that mentioned the alternative, or whether stories actually made mention of there being vacancy at asylums. Not one article in the whole study made such a mention. This study can posit that it was a routine function of press convention to cover the asylums, in terms of their capacity, as being in a constant state of bloating. Seven years after the aforementioned article, the chorus remained the same while the numbers had grown exponentially. The *Statesman* reported in 1894, “There are now 963 patients in the asylum for the insane.”¹⁴³ The story goes on, “This great institution will have to be again enlarged soon.” The author of the article, trying to offer some solutions, closed with the cynical quip, “persons who are not insane must not be sent there, as is done now.” The cynicism around improper internment was a common theme but was seldom the focus of any published investigations. On occasion, there would be a singular case where an individual had launched a habeas corpus case in order to be released from a false internment, and some states had enacted laws concerning the rules of commitment to make it harder to commit a person inappropriately, but it wasn’t a focal theme of press coverage.

¹⁴² *Statesman Journal*, No Headline, April 28, 1887.

¹⁴³ *Statesman Journal*, No Headline, July 29, 1894.

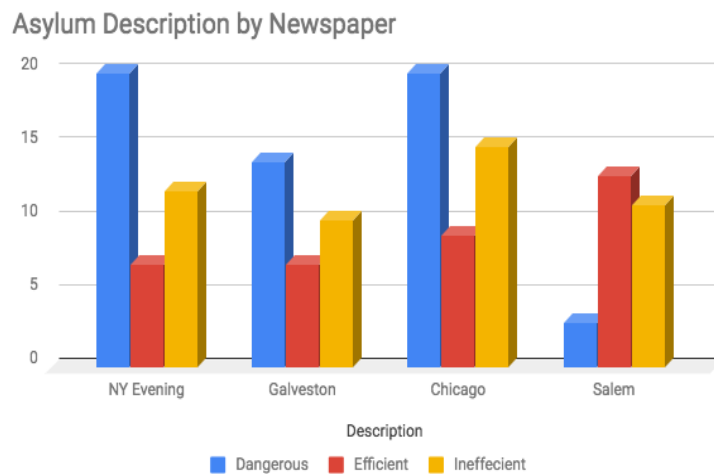
Asylum capacity rhetoric might well be considered a proxy for the general “rate of insanity” in the United States though reporters rarely included the larger problem in operations articles while there would be more mention of general insanity rates and potential causes in commitment articles.

Asylum Description: Not always a dismal scene

News stories that covered the nature and function of insane asylums (n=145, 61%) were far more regular than those that simply discussed respective capacity. Publishers most often engaged with material that spoke to the efficiency or safety of the hospital. These two content categories speak to the two pillar values ascribed to asylums: economics and humane treatment. The hallmark sanitarium was one which operated under budget and with compassion; almost every major investigative piece was one where they were guilty of failing on both values. Hospitals for the insane, however, weren't only sources of scandal and depravity for the newspapers. Even the *Evening World* published a fair number of stories that spoke to how effective certain operations were. In 1892, a relatively optimistic story found the asylum farm for men in Long Island City to be an exemplary outfit. The story talks about the living quarters as “clean and in good sanitary condition, and there is no overcrowding.”¹⁴⁴ In the previous passage, the farm is praised for humane treatment while a few paragraphs further the 1000-acre experiment is also regarded for its profitability, “The farm last season yielded a large crop of vegetables, and it is expected that within two years the institution will be self-supporting.”

¹⁴⁴ *The Evening World*, “At the Farm for the Insane,” February 13, 1892.

But more common fare for the New York newspaper were stories about the dangerousness of the asylums. One 1894 story covering an investigation into Ward’s and Randall’s Islands asylums for the insane poor quoted a commission hearing where a former employee testified to the “criminal negligence, wretched environment, filth, uncleanliness, and inhuman brutality” she witnessed as a nurse at the site.¹⁴⁵ All four papers described the hospitals as inefficient at a rate of 30 to 38 percent. The *Statesman* was the outlier in this data set concerning dangerousness and efficiency. While the other three published stories marking asylums as dangerous at a rate of between 44 and 50 percent, the Statesman was only at 10 percent. Conversely, 36 percent of the Salem operations stories were scored as showing the state asylum to be efficient compared with the other three who were scored between 20 and 25 percent efficient articles.



It’s a tenuous proposition to know asylum realities, making it hard to know the degree to which the news content was truly representative. Though it would appear that there was enough material to provide the newspapers with a choice in how they presented

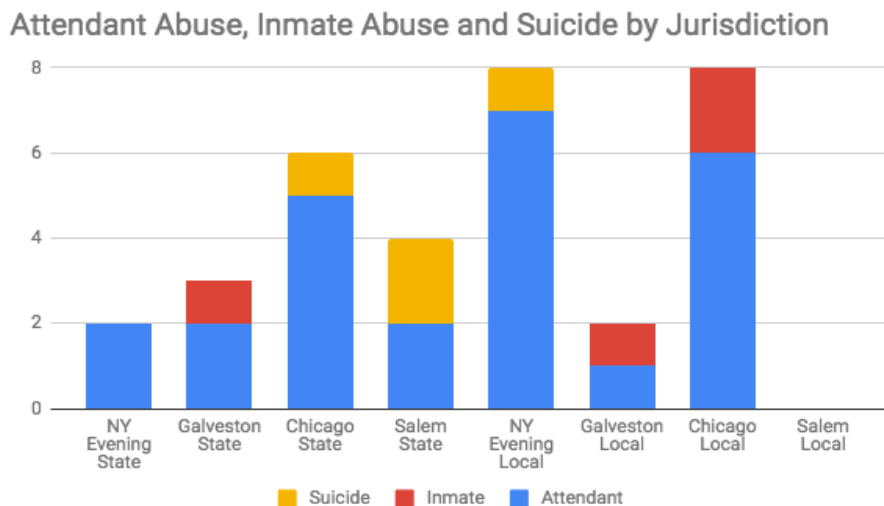
¹⁴⁵ *The Evening World*, “Searchlight on Asylums,” June 13, 1894.

their stories. This study set finds that newspaper proximity to asylums alone didn't have a major bearing on asylum description as New York, Chicago and Salem all had asylums in their cities and some papers had asylums dotted throughout their home states. What appears to be have a more causal relationship to newspaper content selection are intersecting factors like the amount of state and municipal asylums, newspaper circulation rates, state and local population, and the political tone of the state and local governments.¹⁴⁶ This finding is pronounced when analyzing stories that cover abuse, death, or suicide at the asylum. Those stories, while they might intuitively seem to be those that take up a majority of articles, only made up 17 percent (n=40) of all operations articles. Chicago published fourteen, New York published thirteen and Galveston and Salem had seven and six, respectively. Of those stories, Chicago and New York published eleven each that dealt with an attendant or asylum employee abusing an inmate. Beyond that, the papers collectively only published a handful of stories covering suicides or violence between inmates. The abuse stories tended to be about males, employees (n=24) and patients (n=18) whereas females employees were only mentioned in eight stories and female patients in ten stories.

Looking at the jurisdiction of the asylum in abuse/death/suicide stories shows that there was a trend to publish these stories more often about local and municipal asylums than about state asylums. The following section will explore operations coverage as it relates to the jurisdiction of the asylum.

¹⁴⁶ The politics of the varying states will be explored more intensively in the following chapter.

Jurisdiction



The Blackwell Insane Asylum, the subject of the Nellie Bly/*New York World* exposé, was a municipal facility. The investigation also came at an acrimonious time between the state and local governments in New York State as the state was attempting to wrest control of insane asylums from local and county governments and municipal legislators were fighting to maintain control. Looking at the asylum jurisdiction, or whether it was a state-run facility or a municipal one, is a slightly better predictor for the tone and nature of the article than simple proximity to an asylum.¹⁴⁷ There were 225 operations articles where the jurisdiction was scored, of those, the majority were written about state-run hospitals (n=142, 63%) and less than a third were about municipal or county facilities (n=64, 28%) with a handful about either private ones or those located abroad (n=19, 8%)¹⁴⁸. Of the *World's* 50 operations articles, 17 of them were negative

¹⁴⁷ Smith, Wright, and Day, “Distancing the Mad,” 2371.

¹⁴⁸ The data is somewhat skewed by the Salem Statesman, the newspaper only published articles about the state asylum. This is likely caused by the fact that Oregon didn’t have any municipal asylums and sent all their patients to the state facility.

stories about the municipal asylums whereas only 10 were negative about the state asylum. Conversely, the *Tribune* was more evenly spread out. Of Chicago's 75 articles that were scored for a jurisdiction, eighteen were negative toward the state facilities and sixteen negative about the county asylums. Similarly, Chicago was more diplomatic in its neutral coverage of asylums, with thirteen neutral stories about the state and ten neutral articles about the county asylum(s). Taken as a whole, articles about the municipal or county asylums were more likely to skew negative (58%) than articles about the state asylum (47%).¹⁴⁹

Release and Recovery: More legal than therapeutic

The American asylum was charged with the dual duties of housing the mentally ill and curing them to the best of their ability. It has been demonstrated in this project that newspapers published no lack of articles showing the first duty, housing the “unfortunates,” but there is a dearth of articles that show the other duty, curing them. In fact, only six operations articles were scored as having release or recovery as their main themes. A May 1889 story in the *New York Evening World* covers the case of a former Ward's Island patient named Henry Scherr who was released from the asylum on a writ of habeas corpus.¹⁵⁰ The reporter made little effort to hide his or her cynicism about the issue saying, “It seems to be very easy to secure from ‘experts’ the requisite authority for committing a person to a madhouse. All that appears to be necessary,” the writer argues,

¹⁴⁹ This percentage is the same after factoring the *Salem Statesman* out of the dataset.

¹⁵⁰ *The Evening World*, “A Sane Lunatic,” May 10, 1889.

“is a sufficient fee for the ‘examination.’” *The Galveston Daily News*, published a similar story about the North Texas Insane Asylum at Terrell in June of 1893 which had the charge of a Mrs. Mary Newberry who was found to be sane after her being committed.¹⁵¹ In November of 1895, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a short story wherein the Public Service Committee was auditing the Dunning asylum for the name of every patient that could be discharged.¹⁵² This dataset is significant on the basis of scale and theme. There is an outsized narrative about commitments in asylum stories writ large and moreover there is a bias toward articles that show false imprisonment. In other words, the main way for the newspapers to cover a release was if there was some negligence undermining the commitment.

There is a similar lack of articles mentioning recovery or the recovery process in asylums. The Galveston newspaper ran a wire story in August of 1889 stating, “Baseball has been introduced in the New York Insane asylum and the physician in charge of that institution says it has a most salutary effect on the patients affected my melancholia.”¹⁵³ An article from the *Salem Statesman*, published on Halloween 1891, was excerpted from a letter written by a Mrs. Della Pengra about how her husband was “rapidly improving” under asylum care.¹⁵⁴ The superintendent replying that Mr. Pengra “would entirely recover possession of his faculties.” Aside from a small handful of anecdotal articles, there was no body of articles about what amounts to be the paramount duty of asylums:

¹⁵¹ *The Galveston Daily News*, “A Most Singular Case,” June 14, 1893.

¹⁵² *Chicago Daily Tribune*, “Discharge of Dunning Patients,” November 2, 1895.

¹⁵³ *The Galveston Daily News*, No Headline, August 10, 1889.

¹⁵⁴ *Statesman Journal*, “Mr. Pengra Improving,” October 31, 1891.

recovery. It is here that project can show the work that newspapers are doing in terms of asylum coverage. The lack of parity concerning internment stories and release stories creates an overarching narrative about asylums as catch-pans for the mentally ill rather than places of healing and recovery. The news media had an arm's length, if not wholly avoidant, relationship with the actual work of insane asylums. This project establishes concretely that asylums were regular fare for the newspapers. Commitments, and abuses, and negligence and legal battles were common content categories; but the process by which they did their work was black-boxed. The general trend of newspapers sidestepping the medical/therapeutic component of insane asylums seems idiosyncratic given their proclivity for publishing sensational and spectacular stories.

Social death and the birth of the asylum subject

Commitment articles told the story of the expectations of the social subject. The proper subject was one who lived in moderation under a series of maxims: work, but not too hard, drink, but not too much, study, but not for too long. Break these maxims and the asylum was there to collect. The articles would also discuss topics such as the cause and type of insanity, the patient's marital status and profession, their address and which country they were from. Operations stories had a different metric for patient profiles. Often given a name and nothing else. Once inside, the newspaper did not discuss patients in terms of their social attributes, they were reduced to near anonymity. Agency, once inside, was no longer the domain of the patient; it was the doctors, alienists, superintendents and staff that had autonomy in asylum articles.

The *Salem Statesman* reported in July 1895 on the new asylum superintendent set to take over the helm the following month.¹⁵⁵ The article uses much of the same narrative structure that a commitment article might use when covering a person being committed. The story covers where the new doctor was born, his schooling, when and where he was married. “In all his relations of life,” the story lauds the incoming asylum executive, “those who know him give him the highest character and his friends have implicit faith and confidence in him.” The level of personal and professional detail is akin to that which is used in covering incoming patients.

A story about a committed patient takes a different tact. A front-page *Evening World* story published in July of 1888 tells readers of an investigation into the suspicious death of patient Julius Willis, “of 1212 First Avenue, who died suddenly in the insane asylum on Ward’s island.”¹⁵⁶ That is the extent to which any personal detail about the inmate was given. Similarly, in the same paper almost six years later, smallpox broke out at Ward’s Island and the investigators had found whom they believed to be patient zero: “Henry Smith, forty-eight years old, who has been confined on Ward’s Island for at least ten years.”¹⁵⁷ Contrarily, the *World*, covering a new hire for the state asylum, Dr. Julia McAllister, reads that after she passed a “fine civil -service examination,” and had already begun doing good work, “she causes everyone to feel that a woman physician supplies a long-felt want.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ *Statesman Journal*, “New State Servants,” July 9, 1895.

¹⁵⁶ *The Evening World*, “Did the Keepers Beat Him,” July 30, 1888.

¹⁵⁷ *The Evening World*, “Small-Pox in the Asylum,” January 24, 1894.

¹⁵⁸ *The Evening World*, No Headline, March 12, 1891.

Agency, in the articles, is conferred here by the level of description and the first detail in any personal description is the name. Of the 237 operations articles, about half referenced (n=117, 49%) the name of the subject(s). Of those, less than a quarter (n=26) featured male patients and a few less (n=22) were about female patients. A majority of the stories, though, featured a male employee (n=71, 61%) and just a handful were printed about female employees (n=16, 14%). Just four stories covered the ethnicity of the subject while only two respectively discussed the patient's cause of insanity or diagnosis. There were 74 stories where there was a named individual and a profession mentioned. Of that lot, three were in the entertainment industry, one was a religious worker and one was a wife or mother. Sixty-one stories (82%) discussed someone in the white-collar trades (doctor, lawyer, judge, financier); many of these subjects were not patients but rather asylum doctors or judges and lawyers working on investigations and commitment hearings. Over half of the 61 stories (n=36, 59%) about white collar subjects were either neutral or positive in tone. This finding underlines a power shift when the scope of the story was about operations. Operations stories omitted pertinent details about patients, details newspapers normally would have published upon commitment, and recreated the patient as an asylum subject.

CHAPTER VI

THE LEGAL, THE ECONOMIC, THE POLITICAL, THE SENSATIONAL, THE COMPASSIONATE

The American insane asylum system was always in flux. In fact, the only predictable element of asylum care was that it was in a perpetual state of reform. The system occupied a place in American civic life nearly unrivaled by any other institution, it was among the most expensive, complicated, and powerful functions of the era. Asylums tugged at heartstrings and purse strings. They were sites of partisan politics, experimental medicine, and job creation, among other things. As such, they were the perfect source for newspaper coverage meeting almost every core value for newsworthiness: proximity, prominence, timeliness, economics, and novelty.

New York State was in turmoil in the late 1800s concerning what level of government should be responsible for the care of the insane, more specifically the pauper insane. At the heart of the issue was whether the insane should be cared for by the counties or by the state. In a March 1890 article, the *Evening World* covered a hearing over a bill which sought to move all the insane patients in county and municipal poorhouses to state facilities.¹⁵⁹ The reporter didn't shy away from showing who they thought was in the right, starting the article with the disclaimer, "The hearing was noticeable for the vigorous arguments advanced in support of the measure and for the flimsiness of those against it." The article was pulled from the wire from the state capitol Albany, so it fit that the writing skewed toward state control. "In a county poorhouse a patient can be cared for at \$1.00 a week," Professor Dwight, Columbia law professor

¹⁵⁹ *Evening World*, "For the Pauper Insane," March 13, 1890.

and bill co-author, wrote in defense of his position, “the State asylums can care for them as cheaply, and they can be properly cared for.” The article covered testimony from many advocates for the county system as well, and their arguments seemed to rebut any claims made for the superiority of state asylums. What stands out about this article is that it crystallizes the way in which insane asylums were framed, as places of compassion and medicine that were brought about through the efforts of politicians, lawyers and economists, ideally, in concert with physicians.

Although the asylum was a therapeutic institution, the newspapers of the time represented it as a legal, economic, and political site. There were laws governing how one was to be committed and how they were meant to be treated once inside the asylum. The asylums were constantly held to terms of economic efficiency and had to make formal reports once or twice per year on their finances. The asylum was a central issue in politics as well, often featured in gubernatorial addresses, for example, and they were subject to changing partisan climates. While the previous chapters focused on the subjects of the newspaper articles, generally around commitment or operations, this chapter will look at the themes of the articles. The themes in order of frequency were sensational (n=298), legal (n=235), compassionate (n=158), economic (n=86), and political (n=64).¹⁶⁰ These themes would regularly overlap; the legal article could also be an economic or political article and so on. So, while the lines of distinction blur, the chapter will focus on each theme individually.

The Sensational

¹⁶⁰ These themes emerged from deep readings of the material prior to the study. Definitions available in method section.

Sensationalism was employed as a regular tool in Gilded Age asylum reporting, among other content areas. Sometimes a simple phrase could be enough to turn a story from the routine to the sensational; like a story out of Texas describing a man who believed God had commanded him to fast for 40 days in order to enter the ministry. He was reduced to a “living skeleton” and found to be “raving crazy.”¹⁶¹ More than a third of the stories scored in this study were tagged as theme-sensational (n=298, 37%). This study finds that the sensational was itself routinized and, by volume, became the rule rather than the exception in the press. There is an intuitive link between aberrant behavior and the sensational story; the “truth” of a person’s commitment appears ready-made with compelling and quizzical details. As such, most stories involving people suffering from mental illness were rich with two pillars that newspaper editors strove to print: facts and color. The sensational spilled over, however, from the commitment story to the operations story to legal and political coverage. Even stories about seemingly routine functions could surprise the reader with a titillating final detail. A story printed in the *Tribune*, pulled from the international wire in August of 1889, of a prince “abducted” from a Vienna asylum only to be recaptured and recommitted at an asylum in Prussia, could have ended on the line that he was ultimately ruled sane by the physician. But the article about Prince Joseph Sulkowski, insane in Austria but royalty in Prussia, ends with the line “a lawgiver in one state and a powerless imbecile in the other.”¹⁶²

The saga of stage actor, abolitionist, and orator Anna Dickinson, and her wrongful commitment, was a recurring installment in the press. Her years-long experience was a

¹⁶¹ *Galveston Daily News*, “Insane on Religion,” June 6, 1895.

¹⁶² *Chicago Tribune*, No Headline, August 17, 1889.

spectacle throughout. She was hired to stump for the Republican Party in 1888 but butted heads with party officials and was spuriously committed in February 1891 to the Danville Asylum in Pennsylvania. Two months later, after being released from the asylum, she was allowed to take the Broadway Theater stage in Manhattan where she publicly excoriated the Republican Party in a performance of her essay *Personal Liberty*. Within the arc of Dickinson's misadventure, almost all of the admonishable features of the asylum narrative were contained. She was the "Victim of a Vile Plot," one *Tribune* subheadline read, "Her Incarceration an Outrage," the following subheadline read. The story was pulled from the New York wire and printed April 10, 1891.¹⁶³ The story includes a quote of hers describing the insidious abuses betrayed against her in the asylum: "All of the daily newspapers in which accounts of my supposed madness and false representations of my violence were conspicuously placed where I could not help seeing them." Another chapter in the drama, printed in the same paper and pulled from the same wire later that month, covered her staged reading performance. However, the latter article had a different tone. "Anna is Certainly Daft," the all-caps headline reads across the tombstone-style column header; "An Incoherent Tale of Abuse," a sub-headline adds.¹⁶⁴ The latter story was mainly about her caustic and scathing speech described as "repugnant to decency," which forced many theatregoers to leave before she was through. The final insult the story reports, one she made about the New York *Tribune* editor Whitelaw Reid who she claimed "maligned" her, was enough to drive out most of the remaining guests. The last line of the article positions the reporter at the

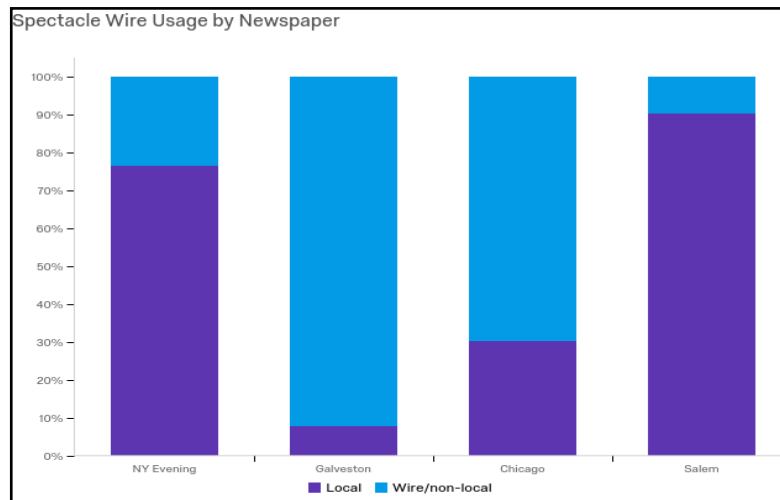
¹⁶³ *Chicago Tribune*, "Victim of a Vile Plot," April 10, 1891.

¹⁶⁴ *Chicago Tribune*, "Anna is Certainly Daft," April 27, 1891.

theater exit, an observer of the crowd's tenor: "Expressions were heard on every hand of pity for Miss Dickinson and also assertions that her once brilliant mind has unquestionably given way."

Later, she would go on to win one case of illegal kidnapping, and three libel suits against newspapers who had printed misinformation about her.¹⁶⁵ Hers was a case where the newspaper and the asylum were intricately intertwined. Opposed to other stories where newspapers observe the actions of subjects, Dickinson's story showed the newspapers as playing a primary role in her confinement and release. However, in spite of the circumstances of her committal and the veracity of the charges against her, she was legally released and back to her work as an orator later in 1891. But the press was able to have a final word in the short term, casting doubts upon her sanity.

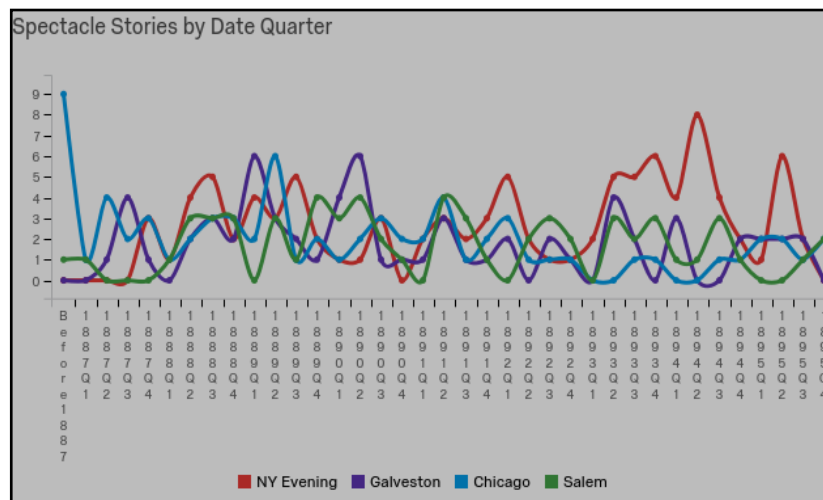
Sensationalism Metrics



¹⁶⁵ Thomas E. Drake, review of *Review of Embattled Maiden: The Life of Anna Dickinson*, by Giraud Chester, *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 19, no. 2 (1952): 228.

Each of the papers in the study would use sensational language on a regular basis. While the *Evening World* had the highest number of articles scored for this theme (n=98), the other three published sensation-themed stories at comparable rates to one another: *Chicago Tribune* 73, *Galveston Daily News* 65, *Salem Statesman* 62. A significant finding of this section is that the papers performed rather similarly concerning front page placement; about a quarter of the stories were front page placements. Salem and Chicago had exactly the same rates (23%) of front page sensational stories with New York slightly higher at 28 percent and Galveston the lowest at 17 percent. Another notable distinction was the rate of stories pulled from the wire by each press operation. New York and Salem had the highest rates of articles published in house, 77 and 90 percent respectively, while Chicago and Galveston had almost the opposite, 30 and 8 percent respectively. Galveston, as shown in other metric breakdowns, commonly pulled stories from the wire but the *Tribune* had ample local opportunities for stories yet pulled more than two-thirds of these particular ones from other print operations.

Word count for sensation articles followed general trends with short articles the



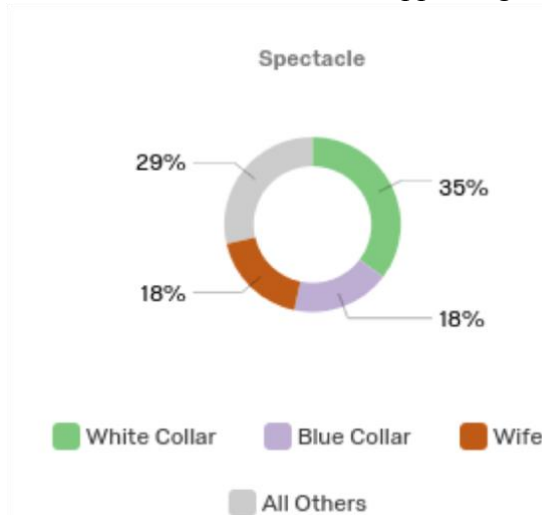
least common, between 50 and 200 were the most common, and tapering off as the articles

got longer. Most of the stories were under the commitment subject (n=231) but about a sixth (n=51) were about operations. I wanted to see if there were any general spikes in the timeline that could have explained the volume of sensational stories but what appears is a generally even rate of stories among the different papers. Though there were spikes and lulls, they were not generalized across the publications, rather the spikes appeared more sporadic. For example, in the second quarter of 1894 the *Evening World* published eight articles scored as sensational, but the three other papers combined only published one.

The press heavily favored men as their sensational subjects with 200 stories featuring at least one male, most often in commitment stories; women were in 93 commitment stories scored as sensational. Twenty-seven stories were about males in operations while just eleven sensational-operations stories featured women. Within that data set, the press still wrote most spectacularly about upper class commitments; over a third of the sensational commitment stories that mentioned the profession were about white-collar subjects, about twice the rate of mentions for blue collar subjects or wives.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁶ Covered in another chapter more deeply, women were rarely reported as having occupations outside of wife or housekeeper.

Sensational articles also had a very high negative tone rate, 88 percent, relative to other theme categories like the political or legal ones. More than half of the articles in this subset also mentioned dangerousness: to others (n=112), to self (n=31), and to self and others (n=9). A *Tribune* article printed the day after Christmas 1895 illustrates the findings of this section well.¹⁶⁷ In the story, J.H. Bissell, a prominent lawyer and real estate dealer, sat down for dinner at his usual seat in The French House inn and restaurant after having a pleasant conversation with the staff. Suddenly, he stood up shouting, “I have just scuttled every vessel on Lake Michigan and I hereby announce that all navigation is closed for the season.” The scene only intensified as he began to smash plates and silverware around the restaurant, many patrons hurried out. Once he was apprehended, he became violent with the officers, trying to bite one. He was adjudged insane and taken to a private asylum. The article, which claimed he would quickly regain his reason, closes with the facts that he was a “fine-appearing man,” “unmarried” and “is



said to be wealthy.”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ *Chicago Tribune*, “Goes Insane in a Hotel,” December 26, 1895.

¹⁶⁸ The story was also picked up and printed in the *Chicago Inter Ocean*, another Republican publication which was later purchased by William Randolph Hearst.

Sensational stories not only ran more often about people in white collar positions, they also commanded more page space and more prominent placement. Out of the articles that were keyed for sensational themed and mentioned a profession, stories with white collar subjects occupied a little less than a third of front page placements (n=9, 29%), higher than any other job category. Out of the 77 stories that were 200 words or more, white collar subject stories made up 36 percent, or 28 articles. Far higher than even the next closest category, wife/mother which made up just fourteen percent with eleven articles. The white-collar sensational article was also more appealing to pull from the wire than sensational stories about people in other professions, 27 out of a total 57, meaning that white collar subjects occupied almost the same amount of wire stories than all other professions combined.

The press may have leaned on the white-collar subjects more often, and with more prominence, because wealthy and powerful people had the means to carry on more extravagant behavior for longer periods of time, and that their names were often already salient with readers. Chicago lawyer Frank Collier, for example, who was in and out of sanitarium for much of his adult life, his eccentricities often made headlines. One of his episodes was published on the *Tribune* front page in March 1890, the article going into detail about him knocking a stranger's hat off, and later riding a horse onto someone's porch and ringing the doorbell, and later buying large quantities of silk underwear for a friend.¹⁶⁹ His colleagues were quoted in the nearly 500-word piece affirming the man's mental illness.¹⁷⁰ Collier's story, like the previous one about J.H. Bissell, comes with a

¹⁶⁹ *Chicago Tribune*, "Frank Collier Creates a Sensation," March 31, 1890.

¹⁷⁰ Eight years later, the *New York Journal and Advertiser* ran into him on his trip to the city where he was getting consultation from eminent alienists on an experimental surgery he was considering.

force of other prominent people with whom to consult, and those people are also noteworthy in and of themselves: lawyers, wealthy restaurant patrons, business owners and physicians.

On the other side, the blue-collar subjects may not have existed in powerful social and professional circles, and their published sensational stories rely more heavily on the reporter to add in color. A July 1892 *Statesman* piece headlined “A Simple Crank”¹⁷¹ helps to make the point.¹⁷² A stair-builder, originally from Wales, was committed because of his obsession with gravity: “Lewis has been an irreclaimable crank for years on the theory of gravitation,” the reporter notes, adding that he had made “numberless” experiments and wasted a vast sum of money.¹⁷³ In another story, this one from the *Evening World* in June 1891, reported on a young man named William Goetz who suffered sunstroke two years prior and was a regular smoker which “helped unbalance his mind.”¹⁷⁴ He thought he had the number seven on his cheek and tried to shoot it off with a pistol. It didn’t kill him, but it was enough to get him to go to the hospital from where he was brought to the Insane Pavilion. Goetz’s story, like other blue collar subject

He ended up having a portion of his skull removed by two prominent physicians to relieve pressure on his brain in 1898. He died in the Cook County Hospital three years later, some say that it was the surgery that was to blame, but even in death he made headlines. A 1901 publication of *The Medical News* wrote “pathologists throughout the country, as well as anthropologists and the medical profession generally, are awaiting with special interest the brain of the late Frank Howard Collier,” whom they opined suffered mental illness as a result of a blow to the head he received during a political campaign years prior.

¹⁷¹ A derogatory term referring to people suffering mental illness, popularized in 1881 in reference to Charles Guiteau who shot President James Garfield. It normally refers to people claiming they are something that they are not. Guiteau thought himself a statesman and political operative.

¹⁷² *Statesman Journal*, “A Simple Crank,” July 31, 1892.

¹⁷³ The irony is not lost on this project’s author that a stairbuilder was committed because of his obsession with gravity.

¹⁷⁴ *Evening World*, “Cigarettes and Sunstroke,” June 16, 1891.

sensational stories was rather short and indifferent. There weren't quotes from colleagues or well-connected friends, there wasn't the implication that he would be missed or that he would recover. Goetz's story was simple, and yet spectacular.

Ms. Cunningham's story, from Arkansas and printed in Galveston, exemplifies the sensational story when a woman is the subject as her condition was caused by the loss of her family. She was a poorhouse inmate who escaped and roamed the countryside, half-naked, and "frightened women and children on several occasions." She became "demented" after losing her husband and children. What separates this story from a routine one is the detail of her encounter with a local school teacher that she approached "with both hands uplifted, and begged in an earnest but somewhat unintelligible way for the cause of Christ."¹⁷⁵

A German woman's story in the *Statesman*, headlined "Another Crank," talks about how her illness presents: "She believes that she is the queen of the United States, is the smallest and most honest woman in the world, and has not sinned."¹⁷⁶ The story closes with what appears to be another standard treatment for most women in asylum stories, her spousal situation, in this case her "husband lives in San Francisco."

Sensational stories featuring women tracked with most stories about women subjects, they were often identified as either married, or mothers, or both. Their conditions were often explained by domestic troubles and were more often brought into the asylum, or police station, by their spouses or loved ones.

¹⁷⁵ *Galveston Daily News*, "A Deranged Woman," April 9, 1888.

¹⁷⁶ *Statesman Journal*, "Another Crank," June 2, 1888.

The sensational can be insidious or minute. However small or incidental the story may be, its essence can be transformed through the use of spectacular language. Being committed to an asylum was a routine social event, but the oddity—aberrance, extravagance, unpredictability—of a subject’s behavior makes the story interesting, compelling, or disturbing. The impact of sensation usage normally works against the subject: the story often making the individual(s) pitiable, scorned, or embarrassed. This theme, as shown above, permeates almost every type of story about insane asylums. The cumulative effect of the stories over time positioned the asylum as a collection of curiosities—a sideshow—rather than a place of compassionate and effective in-patient therapy. Foucault operationalized the concept “ship of fools” to describe the handling and treatment of the mentally ill going back to the Early Modern era. That concept, while potentially being updated to something like “warehouse of fools,” can still be found in Gilded Age press accounts of the asylum. The sensational theme is one that seems to dominate the contemporary understanding of insane asylums. What may be lost to history are the stories that conveyed the humanity of subjects, the empathy of news stories, the silver lining to what may otherwise amount to a pervasive negativity toward insanity and the asylums. These story types, scored under the compassionate theme, are ones that this project also tries to resurrect.

Newspapers, Asylums, and the Law

The Insanity Plea, Alleged Insanity and Habeas Corpus

Legally themed articles informed readers about not only the workings of the insane asylum but also the legal system itself. About a tenth of the legally themed articles

(n=27) were specifically about the insanity plea. For example, a May 1890 *Tribune* story about a convicted robber in Minnesota faking mental illness who was found out after being committed to the state asylum; or a murder suspect with the pseudonym “Jack the Slasher” who was found to be insane during the commission of his crimes featured in the same paper almost two years later.¹⁷⁷ ¹⁷⁸ Conversely, a front-page October 1890 *Evening World* story of over a thousand words detailed the tension, moment by moment, of the hearing of actor Charles Crumley for shooting and killing another man. When the jury returned a guilty verdict, “It looked for a moment that he was going to faint.” Crumley’s case was an unsuccessful attempt at using the insanity plea.¹⁷⁹ In July 1891, the *Galveston Daily News* ran a peculiar wire story from London wherein a man accused of attempting to murder his wife was acquitted on the ground of insanity, but the short article ends with the somewhat contradictory line, “Duncan is in excellent condition and denies that he is insane.”¹⁸⁰

If the last batch of articles documented the ubiquity of the insanity defense and its newsworthiness, even more articles (n=39) were about instances where people may have wanted to get others out of their affairs by having them committed. An Irishman received at the Oregon State Hospital in May 1894 received front page coverage in the *Statesman*. The man, and some other witnesses, claimed that he had never been given an examination and was “sent up by some one who desired to get him out of the way.” This was hardly a

¹⁷⁷ *Chicago Tribune*, “He Feigned Insanity,” May 3, 1890.

¹⁷⁸ *Chicago Tribune*, “‘Jack the Slasher’ was Insane,” January 30, 1892.

¹⁷⁹ *The Evening World*, “Actor Crumley Guilty,” October 31, 1890.

¹⁸⁰ *Galveston Daily News*, “He’d Better Admit it,” July 22, 1891.

one-off. In fact, the porous process of admission was a known issue. In summer of 1888, a Jersey City man, originally from Germany, was picked up in New York City, evidently mumbling to himself, and eventually brought before a judge to determine his sanity.¹⁸¹ The man arrived with two certificates attesting to his insanity from Doctor Fitch and Doctor Shields, the same two doctors that “performed a similar neighborly kindness for *THE WORLD*’s lady correspondent, Miss Nellie Bly.” In other words, these doctors were less than rigorous in their examinations, and the article surmises that the only reason the man wasn’t illegally committed to Flatbush was the rigor of the judge on the case.

For those people who fell through the system and found themselves committed falsely, or at least allegedly so, there was a process in place for procuring a lawyer and a cohort of witnesses who could either testify to their sanity or agree to take care of the patient privately. In fact, there were more stories about people getting out, or trying to get out, using the legal system than there were stories about people getting out after recovering. Nellie Bly, for example, was only released after the intervention of the *World*’s lawyer who had sworn to the judge that he would oversee Miss Bly. Of the legally themed articles, seventeen percent (n=40) were about alleged false imprisonment. The stories of false imprisonment were longer on average (37.50% between 200 and 500 words and 22.50% more than 500 words) than typical asylum stories which were mostly between 50 and 200 words. The Chicago (n=14) and New York (n=21) papers carried the majority of these stories and heavily skewed the findings. The stories were often rich with detail and provided a blend of personal intrigue and facts about the legal system to make them at once entertaining and informative.

¹⁸¹ *The Evening World*, “Taken to Court,” July 6, 1888.

In the summer of 1893, the *Evening World* landed a story of a hearing full of scandal and love and betrayal and legal proceedings that reads more like a script from a procedural law drama.¹⁸² The protagonist, Edward Meredith, admittedly attempted to blackmail a gambler with the help of two female associates. The gambler went to pull a handkerchief from his jacket, but Meredith thought the man was reaching for a pistol. Meredith pulled his own pistol and shot the gambler. All of this Meredith readily admitted. In fact, at the heart of the story was something else. Meredith owned up to his crimes and was only enacting his habeas corpus rights in order to be sent back to Sing Sing prison from the asylum for the criminal insane. He alleged that while at Sing Sing prison, he was made to manage the books where he found what he thought was an accounting error. When he pressed the warden for an explanation, Meredith claimed, the employees of the asylum began to slowly poison his food with narcotics that ultimately made him delusional. Meredith only came up with the blackmail scheme in order to win the hand of a widow that had rejected him because he was poor.

The story informs the reader about a number of otherwise inaccessible facts: that prisoners were permitted to manage the accounting at prison, that prison wardens could easily remove prisoners if they were unruly, and how habeas corpus proceedings worked. The story brings the reader, the invisible juror, into the courtroom to weigh the facts of the case as the *Evening World* saw fit to explain them. Then the story ends with no conclusion, perhaps to be picked up at another time with the implication, “to be continued.”

¹⁸² *The Evening World*, “Convict Meredith’s Charges,” June 29, 1893.

A similar story in the *Evening World* a few months later employed many of the same devices to bring readers into the drama of a businessman freed from Bloomingdale Asylum thanks to the efforts of his indefatigable bride-to-be and in spite of the scheme by his own brother and a handful of co-conspiratorial relatives.¹⁸³ The paper rationalizes the man's case stating they "wanted to keep him in the asylum, although the firm did a business of \$350,000 a year under the management of the alleged lunatic." Upon being freed and reunited with his "bride-elect" he said that there "were other men in the ward where he was confined as sane as he." The story leaves off in serialized form again stating that the man intended to then sue his brother for damages and false imprisonment. The reader is transported from the dramatic and suspense-filled courtroom to the doorstep of the bride's home for the grand reunion where "Solomon was dignified in his jubilation over his freedom."

No serialized asylum drama came up more times in the randomly sampled articles than the case of Edward M. Field, a powerful New York financier, who ran his company into bankruptcy but used the insanity plea in order to get out of grand larceny charges. The *Evening World* followed his case from him being accused of stealing and embezzling in 1891, then attempting to take his own life, to his trial where the ubiquitous Dr. Fitch once again presented committal papers to the judge. Readers are brought into a hearing where Dr. Fitch said Field had "acute delusions of persecution and also a physical expression of melancholia." Other witnesses swore that Field had fallen out of a sleigh once in college and the injury was to blame for his delusions decades afterward. Two weeks later, mid-March 1892, the judge decided that the two sides came to a draw so

¹⁸³ *The Evening World*, "D.J. Solomon is Free," September 23, 1893.

instead of making Fields make a plea, the judge remanded him to a yet unnamed asylum where the defendant could be monitored, where objective observers could test the veracity of his insanity claims.¹⁸⁴ A week later, another article detailed, at length, how Field was sent to Buffalo State Hospital.¹⁸⁵ The reporter noticed a difference in Field's appearance, looking livelier than he had: "His untrimmed hair and beard were not in the wild, disheveled state that characterized his appearance at the lunacy inquiry, and his clothing was more carefully arranged." He was going away for an unannounced amount of time to be monitored by what the judge determined to be the best available supervision. The serial news drama takes the reader into the broker's home where the aged father was a wreck, and to the courtroom, multiple times, where expert and material witnesses failed to convince judge and jury of Field's sanity. Through the drama, readers learned what caused insanity, how it manifested, and to what degree. The serial was as informative as it was sensational. Fields stayed at Buffalo for almost two years because it took that long for the supervisors to ascertain the man's state. The final line of the January 1894 story documenting his being returned to stand trial reads: "This was done on the certificates of the asylum authorities that he has regained his senses."¹⁸⁶

Newspapers were just as concerned with the nuances of insanity pleas and habeas corpus cases as they were with abuses within the asylums and the legal proceedings that followed. Reporters rarely had direct access to the asylum to witness the abuses, so they were relegated to covering hearings about alleged abuses and inhospitable asylum

¹⁸⁴ *The Evening World*, "Field to an Asylum," March 16, 1892.

¹⁸⁵ *The Evening World*, "Field's Asylum is Fixed," March 23, 1892.

¹⁸⁶ *The Evening World*, "E.M. Field to be Tried," January 9, 1894.

conditions. Almost a quarter of the 235 legally themed stories (n=56) were focused on investigations and of those articles the *Chicago Tribune* had exactly half (n=28). The *Tribune* used the courtroom hearing as a keyhole into details of abuse and neglect. An 1887 wire article features the testimony of Mrs. Ella Cummings, committed to the Buffalo State Asylum in New York for her belief in Spiritualism, which the doctors of the time “consider to be a form of insanity.”¹⁸⁷ Mrs. Cummings told of patients being locked naked in cells for attempting to write letters, or others who were crippled by attendant abuse; all of these infractions heard in the context of their legality. In another case, an engineer was charged with subcontracting for labor around the Cook County asylum in 1890 but he was having patients do the work and pocketing the money, so the charges went.¹⁸⁸ And yet another story about the Jefferson asylum gave the reader almost unprecedented access to the gruesomeness of a patient allegedly murdered by attendants.¹⁸⁹ The *Tribune* reporter was allowed to be in the room during the coroner’s examination,

The shins were spotted black and blue from the knees down. Under the left kneecap was a deep, vicious-looking cut, possibly the impress of a terrific kick. A dozen other bruises on both shins could hardly have been made by anything else than a shoe.

If one were only to have the newspaper to gain access to information about how asylums functioned, it would follow that the reader would feel that one was more likely to come out of an asylum dead than recovered. The newspapers performed a service by

¹⁸⁷ *Chicago Tribune*, “Inhumanity to Lunatics,” May 2, 1887.

¹⁸⁸ *Chicago Tribune*, “Affairs at the Insane Asylum,” August 3, 1890.

¹⁸⁹ *Chicago Tribune*, “Says he was Murdered,” October 27, 1889.

informing their readers of asylum abuses, in the form of embezzlement, mistreatment, or murder. It was the newspapers' access to the courts, however, that allowed them into this secondary vault of rich content.

Unlawful asylum commitment and mistreatment of patients made up two of the pillars that informed a third content area under the umbrella of legally themed news: policy. Readers were already privy to the many flaws of the asylum system and how those issues were prosecuted. It would follow that newspapers would also cover the laws that governed the asylums, therefore allowing the readers to understand the context of legal infractions outside of their scandalous or graphic nature. About fourteen percent (n=32) of articles that were legally themed were about, at least in part, an asylum statute or related policy. Covering a case of an unlawful commitment, the *Salem Statesman*, referring to the article's subject only as "the wife of Geo. E. Montgomery," quoted the state law governing commitment.¹⁹⁰ The law indicated that any persons thought to be insane were to be brought before a judge and a physician for an examination of their mental state. The story goes on, "The above section of law is very plain and why it is often differently understood, is a little surprising."

Newspapers would also report on policies that were partially related to mental hospitals. The *Statesman* ran a front-page wire story from New York in February of 1892 discussing a bill to suppress the manufacturing of cigarettes saying that they were the cause of 100 deaths in the past year and "about 100 men have been consigned to the insane asylum during the same time from the same cause."¹⁹¹ The *New York Evening*

¹⁹⁰ *Statesman Journal*, "Mistaking the Law," June 23, 1889.

¹⁹¹ *Statesman Journal*, "Cigarette Smoking," February 13, 1892.

World, in 1888, published a letter from M.E. Berry, Secretary of the Society for Promoting the Welfare of the Insane, who weighed in on the protracted debate over whether people should be cared for in county or state asylums.¹⁹² The article stands out because most published pieces would simply advocate for reforms within the asylum or more funding for qualified staff. The Berry article advocated for abandoning the current asylum system and putting patients in small group homes or with their families, to be treated by local physicians. “This may be new doctrine and may be considered strange,” the article closes, “but it is the true doctrine and should be put into practice.” Ironically, this author was advocating for the form of treatment practiced a century prior, before asylums became commonplace, and a century later, after deinstitutionalization. But, in the time period it was published, asylums were only growing, and the group home system was reserved for the wealthy.

Policy articles fared better in tone than many other types of content, legal or otherwise, as most of them (59%) were neutral in tone, with positive articles (22%) ranking even higher than negative (19%) ones. This factor is in contrast even to the body of legally themed articles which were two thirds negative and just over a quarter neutral (27%) and far fewer of them positive (6%). The tone disparity can be partly explained by the content and nature of policy-related articles. Most of them were told in a routine manner and didn’t editorialize much about the stated policy, thus the overwhelming neutral finding. The remaining articles that were positive in tone could be explained in two ways. First, there just were only a handful of these articles. Compared to the already small population, they had an outsized percentage compared to other content areas. The

¹⁹² *The Evening World*, “New Treatment of the Insane,” February 13, 1888.

other explanation is that the articles were indeed positive, embracing a reform-oriented and aspirational narrative; often the articles about asylum policy would attempt to mitigate bad practice or to offer new methods for ensuring the comfort and care of the patients.

Many of the aspirations toward better care required more than just will: they required money. Asylums were, to put it modestly, expensive operations. In the next section, this project will explore the spectrum of newspaper content that linked asylums and finances.

Compassionate Stories

The range of story themes was expansive and often overlapping. It may seem counterintuitive for newspapers, who have already been shown to be somewhat disparaging toward the asylum and its patients, to also have a compassionate side. But that's exactly what this section will illustrate. The compassionate, similar to the sensational, refers to details within the story rather than a homogenous story theme. Newspapers published stories with a range of tones and themes. Thus, stories could at once be sensational and compassionate. The two themes are not mutually exclusive, in fact they can be complementary as is often the case. This section will explicate the specifics of compassion in the press while also drawing on stories where the compassionate theme was interwoven with other themes.

Middletown, New York, July 1889: a news item covers a baseball game between the convalescent patients at the Homoeopathic Asylum and a handful of stage actors.¹⁹³

¹⁹³ *Evening World*, "They Lay it to the Lunch," July 10, 1889.

The story begins by applauding the asylum as the greatest part of an already great town, the greatest part of the asylum, though, was the baseball team. The team was mostly made up of “lunatics who have so far recovered their mental balance that they may be trusted to run at large with big bats in their hands.” The story was mirthful. The asylum inmates walloped the actors, 20-8, but the two groups had such fun at dinner together that the actors missed the last train back to New York City. “They went home happy this morning.” The baseball game story was sensationally optimistic, showing a different side to the asylum: where the patients interacted with the community, were allowed to roam the Pleasure Grounds with people from the town, and were happy.

A similar affair was covered in Oregon in February 1891, this time though there was more of a pronounced division between the patients and the guests. The brief article covered one of the regular monthly dances at the asylum where “legislators, and their handsome young lady clerks” among others were in attendance. At 8 p.m., the patients were sent back to their rooms and the “able-minded” continued the dance. The article highlights a positive interaction between the community and the hospital patients, closing a conceptual gap between the two groups.¹⁹⁴

In other instances of compassionate articles, the writer might lament either the loss of a subject’s reason, or the mere fact that he or she will be subjected to the conditions of the asylum. Mr. C. C. Blakeslee was transferred from a Portland hospital to the Oregon asylum in November 1889. The article covering his commitment was sensational in the sense that it mentions “he imagines that he is about to possess

¹⁹⁴ *Statesman Journal*, No Headline, February 1, 1891.

unbounded wealth,” but also compassionate in that he “was reduced to this plight by family troubles.”¹⁹⁵

Compassion was able to cut across class divides. A very brief article out of the *Tribune* states “The imperial family of Germany is indeed severely afflicted at the present moment,” going on to explain that a soon-to-be empress was under restraint in a private asylum in Austria.¹⁹⁶ The article did not cite any sources but still used language that would speak to the internal states of the subjects. The theme was one under which the newspapers took license to project the emotion of the subjects whether or not they had attributed those sentiments to a particular source.

Compassion continually came across as pity. Many stories, in fact, were ones where the subject was the “unfortunate” casualty of experiences and events, or heredity, or both. Bertha Kittel’s story was one such case. She had tried suicide twelve times after falling in love with a man who lived nearby. She “had not known what passion was, and in the glow of its possession she changed her views of life and its value.” The *Galveston Daily News* story, reprinted from a New York paper, catalogued her numerous attempts on her own life but finished with a kicker making it all but impossible for her to have avoided insanity because her mom was insane and three of her siblings were currently in various asylums. Though the article does not cite a doctor or judge, the editorial position of the paper was that she was insane.¹⁹⁷

Compassion Metrics

¹⁹⁵ *Statesman Journal*, “Another Commercial Patient,” November 21, 1889.

¹⁹⁶ *Chicago Tribune*, No Headline, August 17, 1889.

¹⁹⁷ *Galveston Daily News*, “Tried Suicide Twelve Times,” June 15, 1891.

Total stories under this theme coding were 158, or nineteen percent of the study population. The individual newspapers printed at nearly the same rate, with each paper printing between 37 and 45 compassionate scored articles. So, no single paper was significantly more or less compassionate. On the aggregate, they were also similar in their rates of front page placement. Significantly less articles (n=12, 8%) made the front page compared with other theme categories. The word count splits also followed general trends with most articles between 50 and 200 words and the least less than 50. The Galveston and Chicago newspapers pulled more compassionate articles from the wire than they wrote in-house (Chicago 56%, Galveston 78%). While New York and Salem wrote the majority themselves (New York 81%, Salem 87%). Though more articles were written about male commitments generally, those commitment stories scored as compassionate were more even with their coverage of males and females (Male 59, Female 50). This parity could be partly explained by social mores that positioned women as more pitiable.

Asylum news wasn't always bad or morose. The compassionate theme had a relatively high rate (25%) of positively scored articles, and they took many forms. Well-known Portland barkeep Ed Glenn was discharged from the Oregon asylum in June of 1889;¹⁹⁸ The McManus bill was passed in New York to allow asylum patients to write letters without having them inspected;¹⁹⁹ Mrs. E.J. Trader attested in 1888 to the "kind and scientific" treatment her husband was receiving as he healed in Terrell, Texas;²⁰⁰ The

¹⁹⁸ *Statesman Journal*, "Discharged," June 11, 1889.

¹⁹⁹ *Evening World*, "April 6, 1892.

²⁰⁰ *Galveston Daily News*, "Mrs. Trader Arrives Home-Her Husband Improving-A Sad Case," April 18, 1888.

“Wisconsin system” of asylum management was lauded and praised for its humane and effective techniques.²⁰¹ Compassionate stories complicate what might appear to be a wholly negative bias in the press. Though they were rare, they were indeed present.

Money: the cause and the cure

Government spending was a resounding topic in Gilded Age American news. Newspapers frequently published accounts of state and local expenditures and the asylum was a regular installation in such reports. However, as this section will show, newspapers did more than simply report on the routine expenses of the asylum(s). They followed the money from the personal to the political, showing readers the role that finances played in causing commitment and its importance in maintaining the titanic institutions. A little over a tenth of the stories (n=86) were scored as economic in theme. This section explores the far-reaching subject matter that newspapers ran under the theme.

Loss

While habits like drug use and alcoholism were frequent causes for commitment, and other causes like injuries or illness were also common, some people were sent to the asylum because of finances.²⁰² Portland businessman F.G. Hanna’s mind became “deranged over reverses,” in 1892.²⁰³ A similar fate befell Charley Jones in 1888, a Wall

²⁰¹ *Chicago Tribune*, “Care of the Insane,” November 6, 1887.

²⁰² Morphine addiction was sometimes called morphinomania and alcoholism was often called dipsomania by physicians.

²⁰³ *Statesman Journal*, “Two to the Asylum,” October 23, 1892.

Street man whose story was featured in the *Chicago Tribune*, who suffered nervous prostration partly from “loss of money in business.”²⁰⁴ The destitute children of the Taylor family in Brooklyn were found abandoned by their father; the mother had recently scraped together \$50 to go back home to England but the father spent it and the mother “grieved over her loss until she lost her mind,” and was committed to Flatbush in 1894.²⁰⁵

To be clear, it wasn't money alone that caused people's prostration, it was the loss of it. Twenty stories from the project's population fell under the category of attribution due to finances. But not all of them were cases where people lost real money, some cases were caused by people hallucinating that they were entitled to some grand sum of money from a distant relative – a sum that for one reason or another was stolen or otherwise interrupted. The asylum was there for those people who lost their means, the facilities were built around the idea of taking care of the indigent. Intuitively, there weren't any stories about people going insane over getting a fortune or by becoming successful in finances. However, if wealthy Americans were to get on the wrong side of an unscrupulous relative, they may very well have ended up in the asylum anyway.

Greed

If a person was declared insane and committed to an asylum, their estate could legally be seized by a spouse or another relative if their insanity proved to be incurable. Reports of family members receiving a loved one's estate weren't altogether frequent (n=29), and they were not always scandalous, but readers were occasionally entreated to

²⁰⁴ *Chicago Tribune*, “Brother Jones had Other Quarters than his Bachelor Apartments,” July 27, 1888.

²⁰⁵ *The Evening World*, “Five Little Ones in Want,” August 2, 1894.

stories of machinations among spouses and extended family members. What these stories provided in the way of knowledge was a guide to how one might go about such a plot.

In a tale of loss and mystery, a deceased child in Middletown, New York proved to be the unraveling of a marriage and the source of a hearing about a grieving mother's sanity. By February of 1891, Mary Carroll had been in the asylum for six years, committed after suffering depression over the loss of her son.²⁰⁶ Her estate was being sought by her husband. Henry Carroll had been spending down the family fortune, supporting a "remarkably pretty Spiritualistic medium" named Fannie Stryker with whom neighbors thought he was having an affair, but he argued Miss Stryker was able to communicate with his dead son. In the hearing, prompted by numerous friends and at least one physician who believed the commitment to be a contrivance to get her fortune, the jury was not able to come to a conclusion over Mrs. Carroll's insanity. The caliber of Mr. Carroll's witnesses was called into question; his bookkeeper was suspect because he testified that a loan Mrs. Carroll granted the firm was paid back in full, though no records existed to prove the claim. The asylum superintendent testified that Mrs. Carroll was grieving the loss of her son and also suffered from a paranoia that her husband was trying to wrong her. Ultimately, the article didn't resolve the story: a new jury would have to be summoned. The irony in the article is that the wife was being held in an asylum against the wishes and testimonies of her supporters while the husband was not committed, at least the story didn't estimate his sanity for his belief that a medium was communicating with his dead son. Mr. Carroll, as reported in later papers, died in 1894 still very much

²⁰⁶ *The Evening World*, "Both Sides Surprised," February 17, 1891.

under the influence of Stryker. He was forced out of his own firm after squandering almost everything on her suggestions.

Another story from New York, 1892 was more straightforward. A man, who claimed he was never insane, was arrested and sent to Bellevue. His wife then appeared before the judge in the case with a certificate of her husband's insanity signed by the infamous Dr. Fitch.²⁰⁷ The article again did not conclude the story but left off with the judge yet to make a decision on the habeas corpus proceeding. It was common practice for committed patients to allege that they were falsely imprisoned behind some scheme to get their money. Newspaper articles benefited from the plug-and-play content available in these story types: intrigue, love, money, deceit, and the law. But it is unclear from this data set how many cases were actually prosecuted and to what degree they were indeed to found to be based on erroneous charges. The common strand is that they were motivated by greed. The newspapers tell a morality tale in these stories, that money can corrupt people and can breed sociopathy among those people motivated enough to succumb to its allure.²⁰⁸ The above sections have discussed how finances were brought into the asylum commitment subject category. The next section will look at stories that talk about corruption at the system level.

Earlier in this chapter, I referenced the story of Mrs. Cummings who had been physically abused in the Buffalo State Asylum.²⁰⁹ The final detail of that story was that

²⁰⁷ *The Evening World*, "Brown Alleges a Plot," June 23, 1892.

²⁰⁸ It is worthy to note here that of the 29 articles where the estate was taken or alleged to have been sought by a family member, New York and Chicago had more than two thirds of the articles and the *Salem Statesman* published none.

²⁰⁹ *Chicago Tribune*, "Inhumanity to Lunatics," May 2, 1887.

Mrs. Cummings swore she was forced to act as a nurse to a fellow patient who paid extra for the service but that the asylum attendants pocketed the money. In another wire story from Galveston about a corruption investigation into a Kansas asylum in 1895, the judge was quoted excoriating Governor Lewelling for selling his “putrid” butter to the asylum among a raft of other “wasteful expenditures.”²¹⁰ A story from New York covered a man released from Ward’s Island on a successful habeas corpus plea in 1889. The reporter editorializes that all “that seems to be necessary is a sufficient fee for the ‘examination’” in order to get one committed. Of the twenty-five articles that were scored for alleging asylum corruption, the large majority (n=17) came out of Chicago. Here we see another disparity in the way newspapers operated in the Gilded Age. The *Chicago Tribune* was more prone to higher word counts and leaned into investigative/political stories more than its counterparts whereas the *Evening World* seemed to be more given to personal narratives of greed, for example.²¹¹ But newspapers, contrary to some theories, were more than vehicles for scandal and wrongdoings. The daily news also made a point of publishing state spending reports and would often report on general asylum expenses.

Reporting the Economics of Asylum Business

Asylums were massive, and massively expensive. In 1892, New York Governor Roswell Flower, a Democrat, is quoted in a front-page *Evening World* article speaking to the current spending on state insane asylums, ““But however the cost is distributed it

²¹⁰ *Galveston Daily News*, No Headline, May 5, 1895.

²¹¹ Many of the articles that insinuated corruption, or even finances for that matter, were also political in nature and that theme will be taken up later in this chapter.

must be paid by somebody, and the greatest economy consistent with proper administration should be exercised.”²¹² The governor continues that the buildings should be comfortable but not luxurious and extravagant salaries are to be cut down. According to Flower, the state expenditure on asylums was \$9,590,488.97 and the committed population amounted to 16,623: state hospitals 7,200, New York and Kings Counties 7,363, private asylums 847, and poor-house patients waiting to be transferred 1,213. Just three years prior, the New York State Lunacy Commission submitted its annual report stating that the spending on insane hospitals was over sixteen million dollars, serving sixteen thousand patients and employing 2707 people statewide.²¹³ The figure looks like a drastic reduction in spending over the three-year period, but that’s only partly true. In the late 1800s, New York had undergone a number of reforms in its asylum bookkeeping. The state took over most of the county insane asylums, but still billed counties and individuals who could pay for care. New York also changed how it appropriated for incidental costs like building maintenance and transportation. That said, looking at various budget reports, at least as far as New York is concerned, has not yielded a consistent number sufficient to accurately track general spending on the institutions.^{214 215}

²¹² *The Evening World*, “Economy is Necessary,” January 5, 1892

²¹³ New York (State). and Willard State Hospital (N.Y.), “Annual Report.,” 1889, 38 v.

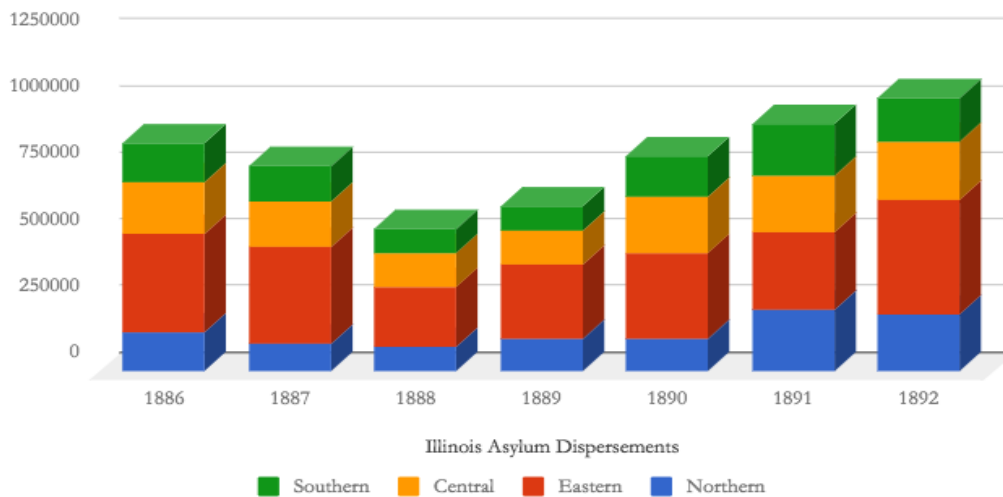
²¹⁴ Analysis based on annual Lunacy Commission reports as well as annual reports from the State Legislature and the Governor. Though it would be possible to tabulate a consistent number for asylum expenses, it would require extensive data manipulation to factor for legislative accounting reforms and line item reporting procedures.

²¹⁵ The state reporting for the Texas asylums was also difficult to access and most of the records haven’t been digitized and exist in special collections at various libraries. Similar to the previous footnote, the information is available but the scope of this project is such that the labor to obtain those documents would ultimately delay completion for a relatively minor detail relative to the project’s focus.

The lunacy commission report of 1891, though, did note in its report the enormity of the costs relative to other major line items.

Considered from a merely monetary standpoint, in its cost and the number of person employed, it rivals the canals and the schools, and it surpasses by far the State prisons.

Illinois Northern, Eastern, Central and Southern Asylum Disbursements

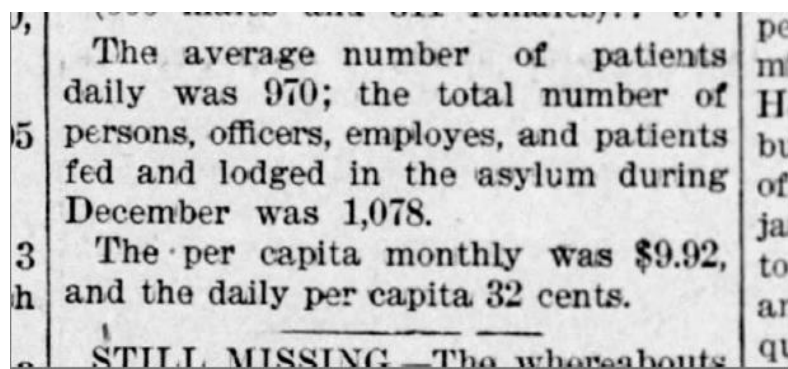


Illinois, which maintained a more consistent bookkeeping method, also saw asylum expenses outstrip most other state-funded services.²¹⁶ According to the 1896 Illinois Biennial Report, state appropriations totaled nearly \$13 million and of that, total asylum expenditures reached \$1.9 million, more than the combined costs of the National Guard (\$393K), the Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children (\$225K), the University at Urbana (\$527K) and state penitentiaries (\$530K). However, asylums weren't a runaway cost category, state lawmakers strove to keep expenses reigned in. The period between 1886 and 1892 saw costs decrease significantly before taking a sharp increase toward the

²¹⁶ "Biennial Report of the Auditor of Public Accounts, to the Governor of Illinois.," n.d., 431. 1896

end. The expenses were influenced by an increased need for materials and labor but were kept relatively in check through market efficiencies and recessions deflating prices.

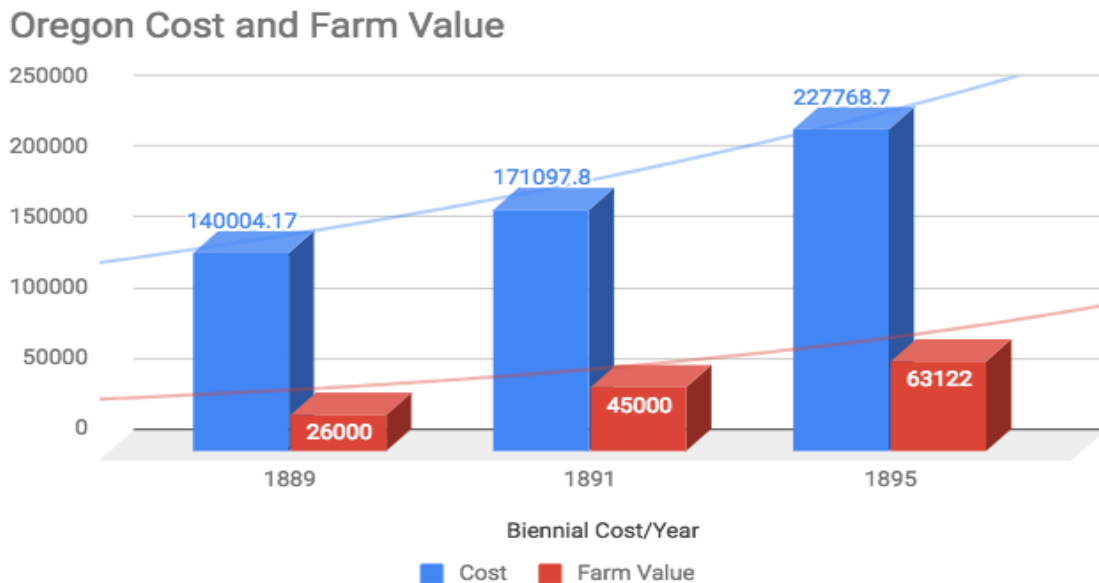
Given the enormity of asylums, it would follow that detailed financial reporting would show up in the newspapers regularly. However, of the 811 articles scored for this project, 86 of them were scored as having an economic theme. Many of those articles, however, were economic at the individual level: financial ruin causing insanity, false commitment over estate inheritance. Only 47 articles were scored economic and thematic in frame; meaning that very few articles actually addressed the general costs of asylums compared with other themes like sensationalism or politics. Instead, the economics of the institutions seemed to mainly be covered when there was a breach or an argument over policy.



The *Evening World*, for example, praised Governor Flower in 1893 for launching an investigation into the Hudson River Asylum because the steward was barely keeping

the books and had little idea as to when the facility reported its expenses to the state.²¹⁷ Occasionally, newspapers would publish the general annual report from the body overseeing the state’s asylums but often those articles were just lists of expenses with little to no context. The adjacent image shows the final lines of a *Salem Statesman* article published in January 1895.²¹⁸ The clipping lists how many people at the Oregon asylum had died, escaped, or eloped in the final two months of 1894 and offers the per capita expense for each patient. Many states used this number as a way to show how efficient their asylums were. The article did not mention the overall costs of the asylum or the fact that the building and its annexes were well beyond capacity.

Another important aspect of asylum economics that newspapers would occasionally cover was the relationship between the institution and the local economy. For the sake of efficiency and sustainability, asylums were often charged with having



²¹⁷ *The Evening World*, “It was Needed,” March 11, 1893.

²¹⁸ *Statesman Journal*, No Headline, January 8, 1895.

some sort of economic output. The Oregon Biennial Reports would publish not only the state appropriations for the Salem facility, but also the profitability of the associated farm, among other items.²¹⁹ Farms were very common installments to the asylum operations; the grounds were often chosen on the basis of the location's arability. In 1892, a cadre of officials accompanied New York's Mayor Hugh Grant to see an experimental asylum project out on Long Island.²²⁰ There, 400 male patients who lived in small pavilions rather than the typical Kirkbride-style building worked a 250-acre farm, mended their own clothes, did blacksmithing and laundry. The committee found that the farm experiment, because of a growing produce yield, was highly successful and estimated that "within two years the institution will be self-supporting." Interestingly, the newspaper article highlighted the success of the City Farm based on the metrics of accommodation conditions and economic efficiency; the article did not mention recovery rates or therapy for that matter.²²¹ The asylum was positioned to be an active member of the economic community, newspaper articles weren't always consistent about whether the market activity was a byproduct of the therapy or the other way around.

Asylums were also major financial engines for the surrounding communities. The enormous facilities required almost every manner of services—electricity, water, construction, food delivery, among other needs—and often those services would be bid

²¹⁹ The majority of male patients at the Salem asylum were farmers and laborers so there was a natural crossover between the lives of the patients inside and outside of the facility.

²²⁰ *The Evening World*, "At the Farm for the Insane, February 13, 1892.

²²¹ The City Farm was portrayed as employing a model in the style of Moral Therapy with its approach: fresh air, hard work, a sense of purpose.

out to local contractors. Newspapers were vital instruments for getting the word out about bids for various asylum services.²²²

The contracting process was often highly competitive and getting the bid meant serious income for the winning contractor(s). An article out of Galveston in 1894 listed twelve contractors selected to provide groceries to the North Texas Insane Asylum alone.²²³ A *Chicago Tribune* clipping from 1886 reported that the longest session of Cook County Commissioners in “recent” memory was about which contractor received the county coal bids, the Cook County asylum was included in the bid list.²²⁴ The *Salem Statesman* ran a letter in 1891 from The Krausse Brothers, a shoe and leather company, who were airing a grievance with the asylum commission for rejecting their bid, which they claim was the lowest, on a “flimsy technicality.”²²⁵ The *Statesman* ran another article reporting on a few winning bids for meat and wood in early 1887, the article finishes by printing at once a blatant piece of racism and matter-of-fact stipulation in the contract that “no Chinese should be employed in cutting the wood or hauling it. Thus is theory made to agree beautifully with practice.”²²⁶ In the articles recently mentioned, insane asylums were shown in their role as places of financial activity, subject to state and local policies just like any other major institution.

²²² Many published calls for bids were in the form of advertisements and they were frequent installments in newspapers, but the ads were not included in the empirical study due to the focus of the study being mainly about editorial content.

²²³ *Galveston Daily News*, No Headline, November 21, 1894.

²²⁴ *Chicago Tribune*, “The County Coal Contracts,” June 29, 1886.

²²⁵ *Statesman Journal*, “A Flimsy Technicality,” January 8, 1891.

²²⁶ *Statesman Journal*, “Contracts Let,” January 20, 1887.

The breadth of activity in which asylums engaged gave newspapers an incomparable range of content to choose from. This project finds that although asylums were deeply economic, newspapers did not report on the numbers as thoroughly as they did with other story areas like legality or commitments. Similar to its treatment of the medical/therapeutic function of the facilities, the press kept its distance from the nuances of finance. Readers were given slices of a large and complicated accounting system, but the stories accessed through this project do not paint a coherent picture of the whole. The economics of the asylum were often imbricated with the political culture at the state and local levels. The financial aspect was thus part of a larger conversation about partisan politics more than it was isolated to metrics of efficiency and sustainability. The next section will explore the political nature of asylum reporting but the assessment that the financial reporting was scattered and somewhat disparate should add context to the allusions to bribery and partisan conflict that marked many of the political articles. In other words, asylum finances were not very well explained in the press, but they were referenced often under the shade of politics.

Asylum Politics and the Press

The late 19th century press had moved away from its partisan support structure of the early 1800s and shifted to a commercial/advertising model. However, the press still incorporated partisan allegiances as part of its market model. The *Salem Statesman* was an ardent Republican newspaper and the *Chicago Tribune* was an unofficial but still supportive Republican vessel. *The Evening World* was owned by Joseph Pulitzer, an avid Democrat. The *Galveston Daily News* was owned by Alfred Horatio Belo, also founder

of the *Dallas Daily News*, whose papers were not singularly Democratic but did support traditional Democrats in a state that was a Democrat stronghold in the late 19th century. As predominant social and economic structures that were ever-present in the press, asylums were the site of numerous partisan struggles.

Though only 64 news articles were scored as having political themes, those articles are important to dissect and index in order to demonstrate the varying partisan approaches of each newspaper and to further one of the project's theses: that the press of the late 19th century was not operating uniformly but were subject to contingencies such as partisan attachments that affected their content choices. Furthermore, the partisan quarreling that accompanied asylum operations in newspapers worked to codify mental illness as a political problem, in addition to an economic and medical problem. This section will start with some of the metrics of politically-themed news articles and then move into a sub-section each on Oregon and Illinois, whose papers featured the most political articles, and, coincidentally, which were the two Republican newspapers in the study.

Metrics

News articles scored with a political theme were placed on inside pages (n=56, 87%) at a slightly higher rate than the rest of the study population. Intuitively, most of the articles were framed thematically (67%) and this was likely because these articles addressed more general topics such as policy. Following from that, only seven articles had male patients as subjects and only three discussed female patients whereas 21 featured males in positions of operations and zero featured women in operations

capacities. Running the asylums was a man's domain. Women were employed as nurses and floor attendants in female wards but were rarely in positions of authority at the time. New York had enacted a policy during the period that required a female doctor to be employed in the respective asylums but that had not amounted to women being given a seat at the table when it came to the upper ranks of asylum business.

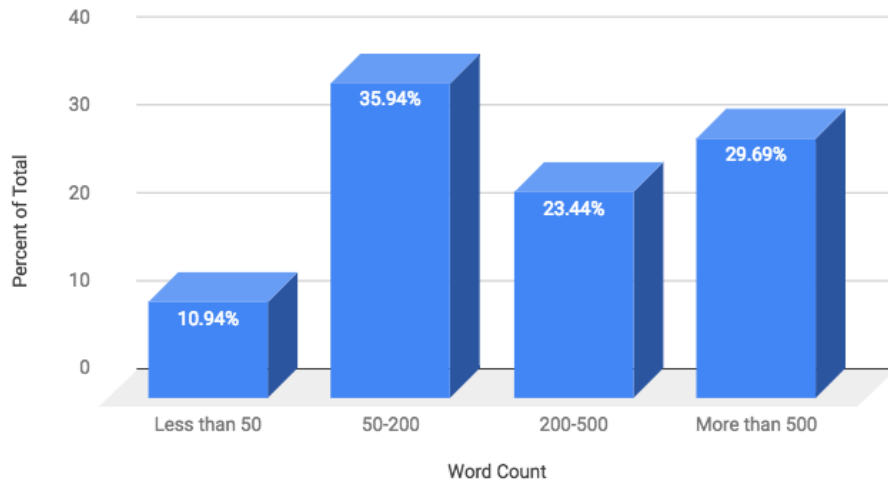
The tone of political articles was similar to the rest of the sample population with a little over half of the articles negative (53%), about a third neutral (36%) and the rest positive (11%). Politics, in this sense, was often a derogatory area and usually referenced partisan disputes as opposed to political victories or the passing of legislation.²²⁷ What stood out in this data set was the distribution of political articles among the four newspapers, the word count, and the usage of the wire for stories about politically-themed asylum news stories.

Typically, most news articles were between 50 and 200 words, with articles less than 50 and those between 200 and 500 being relatively close to one another and articles above 500 words normally the smallest percentage. However, political articles strayed from this formula. Short articles were the least common (11%) and mid-range articles

²²⁷ Articles that referenced bills being passed were scored under the theme policy and many of those were neutral in tone.

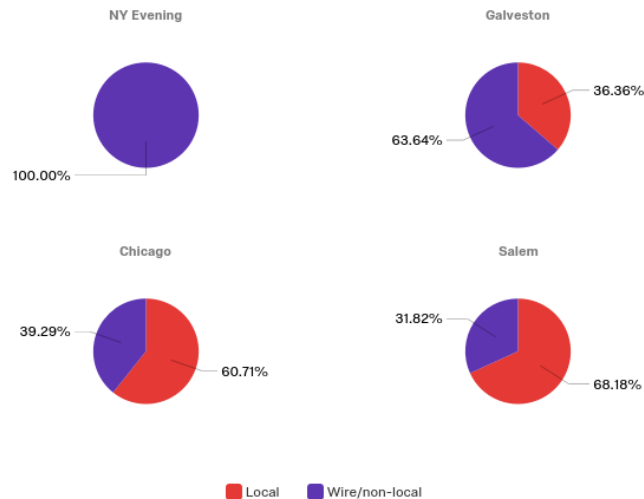
between 50 and 200 words were the most prominent (36%), but those between 200 and

Political Article Word Count



500 words made up almost a quarter (23%) and long articles made up nearly a third (30%) of stories.

Here we can see that the newspapers in the study would devote more resources and real estate to the partisan stories than other themes. This can be partly explained by the fact that these stories needed more context than more episodic stories, and the papers would also print longer quotes. Even more telling is that the *Chicago Tribune* printed 74

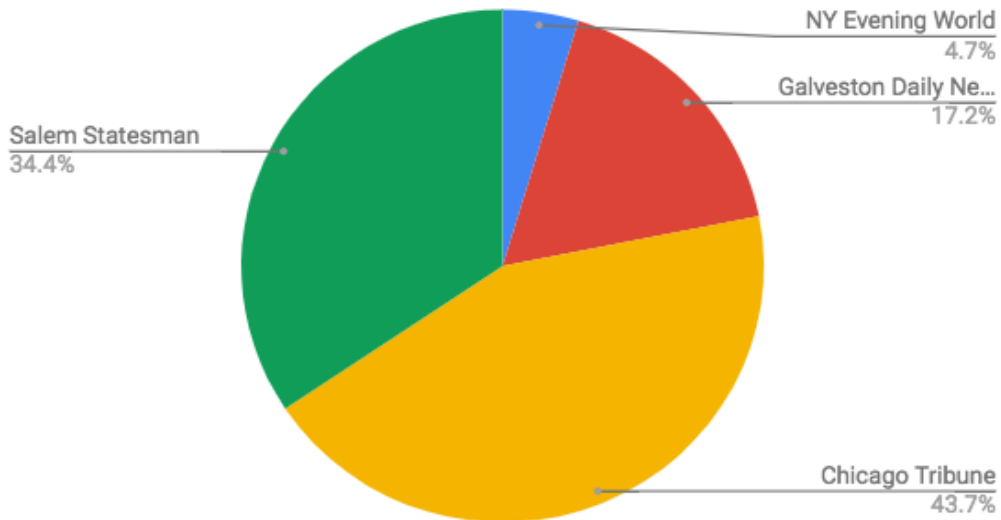


percent of the long political articles. The *Tribune* ran a story in mid-1889 that went into extensive detail about a county commissioners meeting where the group was charged with selecting a new asylum superintendent to replace the current Dr. Kiernan.²²⁸ The article followed the elected body from the boardroom to the hospital from where they adjourned and then returned the next day to resume their discussion. The reporter also wrote in detail about the board opening and reading a letter from Dr. Kiernan who refused to resign, alleging partisan favoritism as the reason for his impending dismissal. “He is particularly sore on the ‘reformers,’ as he terms those that those who do not agree with his political faith.” The reporter was comprehensive in detailing even seemingly unimportant events. “The reading of the communication caused considerable laughter among the members of the board.” The story then followed the board to another meeting which was boycotted by some commissioners on the grounds that it was not being held outside the courthouse. Finally, a recommendation was made to appoint one of Dr. Kiernan’s staff physicians to replace him. This article shows how the asylum was a vessel for political theater, with little to no context about the actual operations of the institution. The newspaper story was more interested in the political wranglings than it was the medical/therapeutic outcomes of such a decision. The *Tribune*, pound for pound, wrote more words and articles than its counterparts on asylum politics. While, oddly, the *New York Evening World* was uncharacteristically apolitical in its coverage.

²²⁸ *Chicago Tribune*, “Kiernan says he will not Resign,” July 16, 1889.

Moreover, *The Evening World*, which normally had more provocative stories than its peers, pulled its scant three political articles from the wire. The other publishers had a more even mix of local and wire stories following the general trend toward wire story usage.

Share of Political Articles



Politics was taken up more by Chicago and Salem than New York and Galveston. In the following subsection, this chapter will explore the politics of each state with special attention paid to Illinois and Oregon. Illinois was experiencing a wave of Democratic officeholders after years of Republican control and the asylum system was a prime site for political appointments. The Oregon state house was pitched in a dispute over where to locate a new state asylum, if one were to be built at all. The respective newspapers were diligent in covering the drama that unfolded. Though New York was going through a protracted debate over housing the mentally ill in state or county asylums, the stories were more legal than they were partisan. Similarly, Texas was in the midst of building a southern asylum near San Antonio but the Galveston newspaper coverage was not acrimonious.

Oregon

In 1887, Democrat Sylvester Pennoyer began one of two terms as Oregon's governor.²²⁹ Except for the Treasurer, he was flanked by Republicans who controlled both houses as well as the national delegation during his administration. During his tenure, the asylum became a two-pronged political issue: partisan and regional. In the early years, Pennoyer's political foes would charge the Democrats of handing out asylum appointments, even at the highest levels of administration. And during much of his second term, the ongoing debate about where a branch asylum would be located had voices from all over the state chiming in about their own interpretation of the state charter. The *Statesman* was a hand for the Republican party but also fought for Salem's local interests in the debates.

The *Statesman* made little, if any, effort to hide its scorn for the Democratic party in its columns. The vitriol was not always explicit but would come across in cynical subtext. "There is something in being a good letter writer," begins a short June 1887 article a few months after Gov. Pennoyer's inauguration. "Dr. Harry Lane, for instance, wrote a good letter to the Oregonian concerning the election of Governor Pennoyer; and Lane has been appointed superintendent of the state insane asylum, at a very nice little salary."²³⁰ The article, while short, portrays the asylum as a political space without reference to its actual function.

²²⁹ In his second term, Governor Pennoyer switched to the Populist Party which was a Democratic offshoot.

²³⁰ *Statesman Journal*, No Headline, June 9, 1887.

The following spring, Dr. Lane came under fire again in the *Statesman* in a much longer article detailing the removal of his steward whom the article indicates was appointed at the behest of Gov. Pennoyer.²³¹ The previous steward was purportedly removed under spurious circumstances as well, “a clique of outsiders, who ‘stood in’ with the administration, to have the republican [sic] steward displaced, and a bedrock democrat [sic] appointed in his stead.” Pennoyer couldn’t use the local paper as a bully pulpit but did rebut claims against the character of his appointments in his gubernatorial address to the legislature in the following biennium: “The assertion can be made without fear of successful contradiction that these institutions [penitentiary and asylum] were never better managed than now.”²³²

The *Statesman* stayed vigilant in exposing what the paper saw as abuses in the Democratic administration. An 1890 article alleged that “party bosses” had hit up all of the asylum and penitentiary employees for between \$10 and \$50 with no real reason given.²³³ The article points out that employees were never assessed under the Republican administration. By 1892, Pennoyer had left the Democratic Party and joined with the Populist movement. A move that the *Oregonian* reported as having been anathema to Democrat loyalist Dr. Lane. The story was reprinted by the *Statesman* and mentioned that

²³¹ *Statesman Journal*, “He Wants Another Steward,” April 28, 1888.

²³² “Biennial Message of Gov. Sylvester Pennoyer to the Legislative Assembly, Sixteenth Biennial Session, 1891 | Oregon State Library,” accessed June 29, 2018, <https://digital.osl.state.or.us/islandora/object/osl:16749>.

²³³ *Statesman Journal*, “Had to Put up,” May 22, 1890.

the governor had recently found “the doctor not a good enough democrat [sic] to hold the office of superintendent.”²³⁴

The asylum, as portrayed in the referenced articles, was a patronage vehicle rather than a place of therapy and recovery for the state’s mentally ill. The newspaper positioned itself as a moral political arbiter. If many metropolitan American dailies were moving toward an apolitical editorial stance, the *Statesman*, and a number of Oregon publications, had not yet joined the new journalism’s “unbiased observer” role in the pre-Progressive Era. In fact, the Salem paper was unabashedly partisan in some cases. “The *Salem Statesman*, a Republican paper, approves the appropriation for a branch insane asylum in eastern Oregon,”²³⁵ an 1893 article opens trying to make a conciliatory gesture to citizens in Eastern Oregon.²³⁶ In this series of articles, the newspaper pivots from its attacks on Democrats and moves into the more paternal role of defending the city of Salem and its local politicians from in-state rivalries. By 1890, the asylum had undergone numerous expansions and was still overflowing. At issue was whether the government would continue to expand on the current grounds, open a new asylum within the Salem city limits, or build a new branch asylum elsewhere in the state. The state charter established that all state-supported institutions be located in Salem but representatives from other parts of Oregon thought it was unfair that the patronage only went to one city at the expense of other deserving communities.

²³⁴ *Statesman Journal*, No Headline, May 19, 1892.

²³⁵ Newspapers varied in their use of capital and lowercase when writing about political parties. For the sake of presentation and flow, “[sic]” will no longer be used in referencing the publication’s capitalization choices and the project will default to capitals for proper party names.

²³⁶ *Statesman Journal*, No Headline, February 21, 1893.

Eventually, it was decided by some that a new branch should be erected in the Pendleton/Union county area in Eastern Oregon, which led to years of acrimony between the two regions. The line above carries a significant amount of weight as the article attempts to ameliorate what became a contentious regional-political battle over where a new branch asylum should be located. However, a letter to the *Statesman* editor in the same year, 1893, contradicted the conciliatory tone the paper had struck.²³⁷ The letter discusses Governor Pennoyer and Treasurer Metschan (both Democrats) “hunting around in Eastern Oregon” for a new branch asylum location. The editorial tells the couple to look at the state constitution which explicitly states that all institutions should be located at the seat of government.

While many state representatives were supportive of opening a new branch, they were conflicted about going against statute. In 1893, injunctions were filed against any future plans to construct the branch. The case was summarily decided in 1896 by the Supreme Court which ruled it unconstitutional to build the branch.²³⁸ ²³⁹ What followed was something of a skirmish between regional newspapers in Oregon; Salem was defending itself against charges that it was behind the injunctions while throwing barbs at contemporary publications. In March of 1894, the *Statesman* took the *Dallas Transcript* to task responding to an article that intimated Salem was responsible for the injunctions,

²³⁷ *Statesman Journal*, “Ed. Statesman,” April 20, 1893.

²³⁸ The branch was ultimately approved and opened in 1913 in Pendleton, Oregon with 325 patients at the new facility. At its peak in 1936, the facility housed over 1300 patients.

²³⁹ Oregon Office of the Secretary of State, *Biennial Report of the Secretary of State of the State of Oregon to the ... Legislative Assembly ... for the Period ...* (Secretary of State, 1897), xxxiii.

to which the Salem paper noted the charge to be “so eminently false as to require no contradiction at our hands.”²⁴⁰

It would make sense for Salem power brokers to stall any developments outside of the capital as the city was eminently powerful because of all of the massive facilities located within its borders, but the local mouthpiece was vehemently against the validity of the charges. The *Union Republican* printed an opinion in April of 1894 saying that Salem will have Eastern Oregon “by the throat” if it wins its injunction.²⁴¹ The *Statesman* rebutted by demonstrating how the Marion county delegation supported the branch opening among other provisions for the east side of the state, adding that comments like the one lodged are “thrown out for the sole purpose of deception.” But the back-and-forth continued. The *Republican* lobbed another charge at Salem in August of 1894 claiming the Salem folks of being greedy and unreasonable in their stance.²⁴² This time, the *Statesman* added a little vinegar to its refutation: “The *Republican* man’s ideas are none above those of the oyster.” The rest of the article, again, tries to disprove the merit of the charges against the Salem people and adds that the *Republican* injures its own case by publishing a litany of “false assertions.”

What the Oregon case shows is that the insane asylum was a thing worth fighting over: fighting to open a new one, fighting to protect the standing one. The refrain of the political/regional arguments over the asylum were mainly centered around fiscal austerity. The Republicans accused the Democrats of sweetheart appointments and

²⁴⁰ *Statesman Journal*, No Headline, March 10, 1894.

²⁴¹ *Statesman Journal*, “The Valley Hog,” April 6, 1894.

²⁴² *Statesman Journal*, No Headline, August 31, 1894.

machine-style politics. The east side of the state accused Willamette Valley actors of choking out other regions to hoard all the patronage. The asylum was a powerful state commodity. Between operational and improvement costs, it was the most expensive Oregon line item in the era. The institution created its own niche markets — patient/prisoner transportation, purchasing of textiles and grocery goods, selling produce and laundry services, etc. — and employed dozens of staff members at almost every rung of the pay scale from attendants to cooks to physicians. The *Statesman* took on the paternal role of protecting its party and local interests. The paper did not go to the mat to keep the sole state asylum in Salem but did rally to protect the reputation of its local lawmakers and citizens who were caught up in the debate. Through its reportage, the Salem publication conflated the problem of asylum management with a problem of politics. The asylum was used in these specific articles as a site of political malfeasance without mention of its chartered duty; the implication being that the problem of mental illness is, in part, curable through regional and partisan cohesion. In other words, the asylum was not framed as a system of therapy but as a persistently growing system of power relationships, a phenomenon that was even more pronounced in the *Chicago Tribune*.

Illinois

The Republican party had enjoyed a near monopoly on Illinois politics for 30 years until, in 1893,²⁴³ citizens voted in the whole Democratic ticket: the governor,

²⁴³ This may have been due to a severe economic downturn under the watch of the Republican Party but that is outside of the scope of this project.

treasurer, state house and senate, and the national delegation.²⁴⁴ Biennial reports from the State Charities Commission were the only ones in the study that specifically mentioned political influence in their official records submitted to the state legislature. In 1893, Governor John Altgeld brought in a whole new administration and that included new officers at state institutions. Central Asylum Superintendent H.F. Carriel, who had been serving that post since 1870, resigned because of the new regime changes.²⁴⁵ That same year, the Charities Commission deduced that a mass removal of employees and appointees at the Elgin asylum was also politically motivated. The writer of the biennial report even went so far as to mention that politics did *not* play a part in the board's affairs.

The jostling of state power was as good as gunpowder for the *Tribune* which didn't hesitate to take sides. Of the 64 stories scored as political in theme, the Chicago paper printed 28. Political coverage was pretty evenly spread over the nine-year study period and the tone was about two-thirds negative. Coverage was split 60/40 between wire stories and local content, local being the larger share. An October 1887 dispatch published excerpts from a feud in the Dakota Territory wherein Governor Lewis K. Church ordered the suspension of most of the Yankton Asylum Board on the grounds of mismanagement, but the board members refused to vacate.²⁴⁶ The board's reply was

²⁴⁴ The Democratic sweep was something of an anomaly on the timeline as the next term saw Republicans take back every major state office and they held that monopoly again for another fifteen years.

²⁴⁵ American Psychiatric Association, *History of the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane: From 1844 to 1884, Inclusive, with a List of the Different Hospitals for the Insane, and the Names and Dates of Appointment and Resignation of the Medical Superintendents* (E. Cowan, 1885), vol. 2.

²⁴⁶ *Chicago Tribune*, "For the Courts to Settle," October 5, 1887.

noted in the article: “The Governor has no authority to suspend the Board of Trustees.” It was decided by the court soon after that Governor Church did, in fact, have that power and the board members were removed thus allowing the \$92K expansion project to begin with a new, more “capable” board on hand.²⁴⁷ The *Tribune* was also following the drama just to the east with the story of embezzlement charges against the Indiana Insane Asylum Treasurer Philip M. Gapen, a Democrat.²⁴⁸ The piece added in its own context about the Democratic administration “under which there have been such notoriously outrageous abuses,” before implicating a slew of other high-ranking Dems in the scheme. The Chicago broadsheet was keen to print stories where the asylum was caught between parties and/or between local and state government but saved its most intense and lengthy reporting for the local fare; more than half of its long (200-500, 500+ words) stories were produced in-house.

The *Tribune*’s political asylum narrative took on more than just graft. The daily implicated Democrats as being responsible for mismanagement, abuse between patients and from attendants, and even found Dems to be using the asylum to undermine the electoral system itself. A 300-word piece in November 1886 warned Republicans to keep an eye on the Jefferson municipal elections as Dems were going to try and shuttle all of the asylum patients and poorhouse residents to the polls “like so many cattle in favor of the whole Democratic ticket.”²⁴⁹ On the Saturday before the 1888 elections, the

²⁴⁷ *Congressional Serial Set* (U.S. Government Printing Office, 1889), 738.

²⁴⁸ *Chicago Tribune*, “Says he Took the Money,” February 19, 1887.

²⁴⁹ *Chicago Tribune*, “The Votes of Non-Resident Paupers-What Steps have been Taken to Exclude Them?”, November 1, 1886.

newspaper published a letter to the editor from Republican State Senator George Torrance refuting allegations in a Democrat pamphlet accusing his party of extravagance and overspending.²⁵⁰ Torrance referenced the per capita costs of the state's asylums, less than those of eight other Republican and Democratic states, to make the point that Illinois was more efficient than his opponents had charged. What is more, he used the information to prove that the opposition party couldn't be trusted with the state finances. The *Tribune* maintained a consistent approach to partisanship, battling against Democratic influence at the county level and moving that stance to the state level even before President Grover Cleveland rode what *The Times* of Richmond, Virginia called a national "Democratic Cyclone" on its front page the day after the 1892 general election.²⁵¹

An investigation into abuses at the Cook County asylum in 1889 was covered in such a way as to show that patients were allowed to beat one another, and some were even strapped to a water heater, scalded, on the order of attendants appointed by the county Dems.²⁵² Similar to the *Statesman* in Oregon, some of the stories the *Tribune* published also went after rival newspapers. In one case, an article covering an 1891 investigation into the state asylum at Anna, instigated by Democrats claiming abuses under the nose of a loyal Republican superintendent, accused the Democrats of feeding biased and incomplete information to Democratic newspapers in the area.²⁵³ In April of

²⁵⁰ *Chicago Tribune*, "Palmer's State Expenses Bugaboo," November 3, 1888.

²⁵¹ *The Times (Richmond)*, "Glorious Victory," November 9, 1892.

²⁵² *Chicago Tribune*, "A Tomb for the Living," June 20, 1889.

²⁵³ *Chicago Tribune*, "A Raid on the Anna Asylum," April 18, 1891.

1893, showing that the *Tribune* was equally concerned with state-level partisanship, a story that ran from the top to the bottom of page nine, dissected what appeared to be infighting among Democrats over a superintendent appointment. The story referenced politicians from across the state who were, or were not, aligned with the newly inaugurated Dem Governor Altgeld and called out county commissioners in the Elgin region for looking at “the asylum as their trough.”²⁵⁴

The content of the Chicago political asylum articles remained consistent throughout the study, the daily was a stalwart for the Republican party at every level of government. The stories exposed abuses, both humane and financial, in service to its implicit charter of being a voice for justice and fiscal austerity. The *Tribune* went into more detail than its Oregon counterpart, exhaustively building its case(s) against its opposition. The asylum, per the newspaper articles, was largely a political football, its failings and abuses explainable by political corruption. The conditions of the asylums, county and state-run, were grist for a general narrative that supported a larger but loosely related political narrative. Where some stories about asylum abuses explained that they were caused by the conditions of overcrowding, negligent management, and violent patients, the Chicago case shows that politics (read partisan), was the actual condition as presented in the press; the abuses were the symptoms.

Conclusion

Writers had an array of options for asylum coverage: from the negative economic story to the neutral political story to the positive compassionate story. The press relied on

²⁵⁴ *Chicago Tribune*, “Disobeys his Chief,” April 24, 1893.

a system of flexibility in its asylum coverage: the type of content, the subjects, the thematic approach, page placement and wire usage, etc. Analyzing the press content through themes shows the prevalence of the insane asylum in American life as well as the almost omnipresent role the newspaper reporter played in its coverage. The newspaper takes the reader from the living rooms of families coping with the commitment of a loved one, to the courtroom where one is being examined, to the inside of the asylum where one is to be treated. Moreover, the reporter brings the reader to the legislature to hear debates over new and contested reform measures, and to the street where people suffering with mental illness make fools of themselves. The newspaper divulged sensitive personal details like people's addresses, workplaces and names of subjects' relatives. Articles would publish excerpts of love letters and discuss the possessions patients brought into the asylum upon commitment. The latter part of the nineteenth century was typified by the marketplace model, and asylum content was a product that could be molded to almost any consumer. It was not just the horrid and abusive conditions of the institution that made print; it was almost every detail imaginable that became fair game for the press. This chapter shows that the insane asylum was not an easily contained entity as it suffused almost all manner of American life. The press used the asylum as a conduit through which it too could plant itself in almost every scene, giving the reader unprecedented access to the drama as it happened.

CHAPTER VII

MENTAL HEALTH CARE IN THE PRE-PROGRESSIVE ERA: AN ANALYSIS OF MEDICAL WRITINGS BETWEEN 1885 AND 1895

This chapter will lay some of the groundwork for a question that comes up throughout the body of the project: why didn't the newspapers of the late nineteenth century investigate the medical/therapeutic side of the asylums as intensely as they did some of the other factors like politics or economics? In fact, newspapers seldom reported on the *actual* process of healing at all. This finding remains a persistent gap in the news coverage. This chapter attempts to answer that question in part by showing that the medical community was inchoate in its treatment of mental illness. While some physicians were pushing for a more regimented approach to the treatment of mental illness, there was very little agreement among practitioners about the right way to execute treatment. I find this to be a conundrum because the press of the era seemed to gravitate toward content areas that were rife with scandal, infighting, and inefficiency but they left the medical community virtually untouched in spite of sometimes acrimonious debates among practitioners.

The medical industry, in the late 19th century, was going through a number of changes as an archaic mainstream health system yielded way to a new, more scientific approach. Physicians began to look for medical universals rather than treating each person as an isolated case.

The world of mental health was also undergoing major shifts as a result of new treatment methods in the late 19th century. The nascent field of psychoanalysis was taking root in Austria. Mental health practitioners at the time were largely concerned with

proper documentation and treatment of mental health issues for the benefit of individual patients and for the professional field of mental health care. What follows is a primary document analysis of a series of articles published in *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* demonstrating the nature of the mental health conversation of the era, as told by practicing medical professionals.

The period for this analysis is 1885-1895; the articles were accessed through University of Oregon's Library system. Once selected, a series of keyword searches produced the final batch of articles for consideration. Keywords were chosen to represent some of the terms associated with mental health at the time, including hysteria, delirium, insanity and asylum. I evaluated the resulting articles for content and chose the final batch of fifteen articles because those articles addressed the state of mental health care most directly.

Before entering into the synopsis, I would just state at the outset, how eye-opening this leg of the project was. Going in, I expected there to be far more vitriolic and insensitive language coming from the physicians and "alienists" cited in the articles. However, there was a general tone of professionalism, compassion and urgency found in most of the writings. There was the occasional degrading remark about the poor and indigent but nothing that would seek to preclude them from the benefits of mental health care. What was also interesting to watch was the degree to which many writers sought to find links between physical and psychical phenomena; the tongue's condition, knee-jerk reflexes, temperature, uric acid levels, etc. Finally, between 1885 and 1895, mental health practitioners admittedly had a long way to go before they had real data that they could work with. Physicians would scold one another for lazy practices, lack of attention to

detail, failure to follow scientific protocol, etc. In the final analysis, the closing years of the 19th century represent what Thomas Kuhn might call a pre-paradigmatic state in the field. Moreover, the articles show that there was very little profession-wide progress made, rather a series of fits and starts within silos of practice.

In January of 1885, Allan McLane, consulting physician to NYC Insane Asylum, attempted to categorize certain ailments in order to get practitioners to work from the same page. Introspective insanity, he described, is that which the person acts with the entirety of their being to accomplish mundane and nervous tasks. He cited one example where a marine hospital patient with symptoms resembling what would today be called Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. McLane contests in the article that phobia(s), while seemingly innocuous, can lead to severely antisocial and even violent behaviors. This article is significant because it addresses a concern that the doctor felt was being ignored or inappropriately handled. McLane's perspective is valuable because he was in constant contact with asylum residents where he could see the diseases play out beyond what a non-asylum doctor saw.

Five years later, CW Suckling, in May of 1890, was asked to look at a patient with agoraphobia. He had not seen the condition in years and found the literature in all of the main medical resources to be lacking. He argued that agoraphobia could be traced to neurasthenia, a basic condition from which many other ailments sprung. He went on to indicate that neurotic patients usually have neurotic children who remain on the verge of insanity most of their lives.²⁵⁵ He cited a number of patients whom he had consulted, or

²⁵⁵ CW Suckling, "Agoraphobia and Allied Morbid Fears," *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences (1827-1924)*; 99, no. 5 (May 1890): 480.

read the literature on, arguing agoraphobia as the most important of the chronic fears because it could incapacitate patients. He prescribed environmental changes to cure the neurosis underlying morbid fears, including pleasant weather, less work, fresh air, engaging in society, and a few pills of iron and bromide.²⁵⁶ Dr. Suckling was trying to find a more valid causal link for two phobias. Rather than let his patients give in to hearsay, he offered a more complicated, but more scientifically “rigorous” explanation. Additionally, his environmental remedy echoed the same principles undergirding the lunatic asylum therapeutic method or moral treatment.

Speaking more directly to the issue of asylums in 1885, Baltimore doctor John van Bibber, offered an indictment of the asylum system on a number of grounds, and recommended a series of steps for correcting the multifold issues.²⁵⁷ Head physicians, at the time, were mandated to live in the asylums, the writer wanted to end this mandate to allow the head physicians out in to the world to return each day fresh to work.²⁵⁸

Van Bibber, commenting on the state of mental health training, said, “For in few medical schools is there any instruction on the diseases of the mind, and if there is any provision for such teaching, it is of the most elementary and superficial character.”²⁵⁹ He lamented that most asylums fell to the state or local government to fund and run and the buildings typically became overcrowded, making the environment highly prone to mistakes. Furthermore, the medicine of mental illness had long been neglected, and

²⁵⁶ Suckling, 484.

²⁵⁷ Van Bibber, “Article III.: Intermediate Hospitals for the Treatment of Acute ...,” 39.

²⁵⁸ Van Bibber, 40.

²⁵⁹ Van Bibber, 40.

progress looked dismal since most doctors stayed away from the pursuit.²⁶⁰ Van Bibber attacked the system on a number of interrelated faults such as mingling the curable with the incurable making physician(s) and staff ineffective, basically treating everyone like a chronic case. Furthermore, in his estimation, mingling created a public impression of insanity as disgraceful, something to hide.²⁶¹

Van Bibber proposed a new system of treating the mentally ill consisting of smaller hospitals for the curable and leaving the incurable for the asylum where they would be tended to custodially (a model that would be adopted generally 80 years later). This model, which had met with mixed success rates in New York and Pennsylvania, he argued, would have brought the medical professionals back in a way that encouraged them to do more research on psychological conditions, and ultimately that more professionalization/training specific to insanity would help to eradicate the stigma surrounding it.^{262 263}

The doctor ends his appeal condemning the way that patients were put into asylums, saying it was far too broad and generic; it merely took a signed note from the doctors saying the person was insane, no mention of which disease(s) were diagnosed or its extent, not to mention the admitting doctors oftentimes lacked rigorous qualifications. Van Bibber had his thumb on one of the hottest issues of the age.

²⁶⁰ Van Bibber, 42.

²⁶¹ Van Bibber, 45.

²⁶² Van Bibber, 46.

²⁶³ Grob, *The Mad among Us*.

The following year, 1886, Richard Kinkead, a professor of obstetric medicine in London, wrote about the inhospitable and inhumane attitude that the British legal system held toward the mentally ill, and indicated that the same held true for judges in the United States. The legal standing on insane people, he argued, tries to find them punishable by law for crimes but, he insists, insane people do not know they are insane and. “Mad” men typically only know they are mad when other madmen in the asylum setting surround them.²⁶⁴ He explained that inside the asylum, the insane person sees authoritative power in the form of the attendants, however the power they wield is not reformatory to the extent that the “mad man” would observe rules outside of the asylum. Writing about a British judge who deemed that the insane were able but unwilling to control their criminal actions, “He makes madness to mean badness.”²⁶⁵ Kinkead accuses the judge in question of asserting that contemporary mental diseases are really just cunning ways of masking intentional criminal behavior (monomania, kleptomania, homicidal mania, etc.). The writer finally makes the point that since the penal system was unable to curb crimes committed by the insane, that their rightful place is in an asylum where protection can be afforded for the insane and the surrounding communities.

So far, the articles demonstrate a general lack of functionality when it comes to mental illness and society. One physician went after his colleagues for misdiagnosing common mental disorders, while another went after the asylum system and the inherent failures within, while yet another doctor indicted the legal system for being ignorant and inhumane toward the mentally ill. To further demonstrate the ills of the burgeoning

²⁶⁴ Richard Kinkead, “Insanity And Crime,” *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* (1827-1924); 184 (October 1886): 377.

²⁶⁵ Kinkead, 378.

profession, an 1888 article shows it was common at the time for physicians to consult the family history to determine whether the patient was predisposed to any mania or melancholic episodes. Francis Shepherd, Professor of Anatomy, McGill University, detailed a young and strong lawyer, who had leg surgery. After the second surgery, the patient became very delusional, trying to bite anyone who came near him and shrieking all the time. He eventually died of exhaustion, and the attending physician noted that the grandfather had bouts of insanity. Shepherd's article represents an intersection between somewhat routine medical practice and mental health at a time when there wasn't a wealth of information on the effects of certain anesthetics. However, it should be noted that familial predisposition to insanity seemed to be a sufficient explanation of a patient dying of exhaustion after weeks of maniacal outbursts.

Julius Althaus, Senior Physician to the Hospital for Epilepsy and Paralysis, writing from London in April of 1892, found yet another cause of insanity, the flu. He found that there were numerous cases of insanity following flu and cholera outbreaks but they had not been documented well enough, a common complaint. In one case, a woman who fell into bouts of nervousness after the flu, who was given sleep aids and digestion medicine, seemed to recover after a few months. Doctors would often associate physical symptoms with the patient's mental disorder, checking bowel movements, phosphates in the urine, blood pressure, heart rate etc.

Althaus reasoned that fever irritates the brain and nervous system to the point that it leads to a depression. Althaus added that his colleagues, who attribute post-flu psychoses solely to predisposing conditions, are wrong. Althaus is claiming in this article on numerous fronts. First to create a realistic description of post-flu manias and to show

they are different from those associated with general neurasthenia. This article is strong evidence for a scientific turn in the field, the writer is trying to establish generalized and universal norms for the rest of the practice to adopt.

In January of 1889, Landon Carter Gray, Professor of Nervous and Mental Diseases in the New York Polyclinic, invoking contemporary John Van Bibber, wrote on the inefficiency of, and harmful outcomes from, the asylum system. People sent to an asylum, Gray found, were forced to live with a stigma for the rest of their lives, even if their conditions were readily curable. In contrast, certain people who had diseases much worse than those treated in asylums but treated at home, suffered far less stigma. He added that some cases do need to be treated in an asylum; those that are chronic and incurable, suicidal or homicidal.²⁶⁶ The doctor attempted to delimit the three basic types of mental disease; mania, melancholia and dementia. Milder cases of mania and melancholia could be treated from home with proper attention; insanity of doubt, the repeated washing of hands. He argued that most chronic forms of insanity, including the insanity of masturbation, should be treated in their appropriate setting, the asylum.²⁶⁷ Here again, we see evidence of a mental health system rife with internal conflict. Carter Gray, similar to Van Bibber above, was attempting to ameliorate the current system with what seemed like reasonable alternatives.

TS Clouston, writing in April of 1889, said most physicians were treating cases of mental disorder all wrong. Summing it up this way, “The sins of ancestry and of self at

²⁶⁶ Landon Carter Gray, “What Cases of Insanity Shall we Treat at Home?” *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences (1827-1924)*; 97, no. 1 (January 1889): 33.

²⁶⁷ Carter Gray, 37.

last produce their natural fruit in an attack of what we call mental disease, but which would be better named cortical disease.”²⁶⁸ The doctor posits the cerebral cortex as the primary organ responsible for much of the body’s functioning, including mental disorders. Clouston denounced doctors for hastily prescribing sedatives for mental illness rather than approaching the problems holistically, looking at the environmental factors in order to cure the patient.²⁶⁹ Clouston also discussed the usage of hypnotics as sleep agents, but cautioned his colleagues from relying on them too heavily.

In 1891, Dr. Henry Stedman attempted to classify best patient practices, arguing for early intervention, whether in the form of an asylum or something else. He set out to establish some general rules for treatment types, but also notes that the poor should go to an asylum because they will not receive adequate care in their own homes. Somewhat paradoxically, Stedman notes, the asylum can be detrimental to the insane person because the person does not receive good individualized care and has to be surrounded by other insane people.

Stedman concludes by saying that asylums did well treating the insane, but noted it unlikely people will ever be allowed out of the asylum, or that they will quickly be restored once released.²⁷⁰ He seemed to be writing for an affluent population which had the means to have attendants at home while dismissing any possibility for the poor and

²⁶⁸ TS Clouston, “On the Use of Hypnotics, Sedatives, and Motor Depressants in the Treatment,” *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences (1827-1924)*; 97, no. 4 (April 1889): 351.

²⁶⁹ Clouston, 353.

²⁷⁰ Henry Stedman, “The Selection of Cases of Insanity for Different Methods of Private Care,” *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences (1827-1924)*; 101, no. 4 (April 1891): 366.

indigent because they don't have the option of home care available, relegating them to the asylum for even acute and curable problems.

Continuing the tradition of articulating best practices, Philip Coombs Knapp, writing in December of 1892, submitted his assertion that too many physicians were associating very specific disorders with one very general diagnosis, traumatic neurosis. Knapp said that there were varying levels of neurasthenia; trauma can cause one form of it, akin to what we call PTSD now. Knapp added that there exists neurasthenia of physical origin, which presents differently than that of traumatic origin as evidenced by less nightmares and more depressive behavior among other symptoms.²⁷¹ He classified numerous cases that were previously classified en masse as traumatic neurosis. He closed saying far more work was needed to make sure that diagnoses were accurate.

Three years later, Knapp submitted yet another article cautioning his colleagues away from diagnosing nervous disorders based on inaccurate science. The problem he identified was that many physicians and alienists were hastily associating nervous disorders with ailments in other parts of the body. For example, he noted that often times gynecologists would tell women that their mania was due to some disruption in the pelvic area. The gynecologists would remove the aberrant part and they would see temporary nervous relief. However, Knapp found mania(s) would come back shortly after to the same degree of severity. Often times, he wrote, nervous disorders are not reflex symptoms of pains in other areas but that the degenerate brain is mainly responsible. He acknowledged that diseases in organs can give rise to nervous diseases, but only because

²⁷¹ Philip Coombs Knapp, "Traumatic Nervous Affections.1: An Attempt at Their Classification," *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences (1827-1924)*; 104, no. 6 (December 1892): 639.

of the exhaustion and anemia associated with said disease. Furthermore, he warned against standard practice saying that surgical operations should never be performed to cure nervous diseases.²⁷² Knapp, in both articles, shows how little the medical field truly understood about the functioning of the nervous system. To that he attempts to steer his colleagues forward with hard scientific data to dissuade any future erroneous surgeries or diagnoses.

Ely Van De Warker, in direct contrast to Knapp, writing in November of 1892, defined mania as a mental phenomenon where the sufferer is not able to divert their mind. Van de Warker, a gynecologist, posited that hysteria cases were too often sent to the asylums, not to the appropriate care provider, the gynecologist.²⁷³ Furthermore, Van de Warker posits that putting people in an asylum could be detrimental because certain people may not be insane at all but rather imitating the behaviors of those around them. Van de Warker asserted that about ten percent of female inmates under the age of 35 could be treated outside of an asylum by a gynecologist.

Advocating that more alternative treatments be recognized, Frederick Peterson, Chief of Clinic, Nervous Department at the Vanderbilt Clinic, writing in February of 1893, argued that alternative treatments are often overlooked, and drugs and electricity were used often with good effect. Furthermore, the water cure had been dismissed outright by some as ineffective quackery.²⁷⁴ However, the writer argued, the cure was

²⁷² Philip Coombs Knapp, "The Alleged Reflex Causes of Nervous Disease," *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences (1827-1924)*; 110, no. 4 (October 1895): 414.

²⁷³ Ely Van De Warker, "Hysterical Mania," *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences (1827-1924)*; 104, no. 6 (November 1892): 547.

²⁷⁴ Peterson, "Hydrotherapy in the Treatment of Nervous and Mental Diseases," 133.

working in Europe. Peterson laid out yet another classification system for those that wanted to employ hydrotherapy. Basically, by alternating hot and cold water, certain conditions could be mitigated or alleviated. Peterson described how water therapy can then be applied to a patient with mental illness. First, he called for asylums to use rain-baths (showers) for patients instead of bathing them in tubs where the same water was used for multiple patients. From there, he explicated his system; insomniacs can be treated with warm, wet blankets, maniacal excitement can often be treated with straight jacket and medicine for the stomach, and warm, wet blankets. Congestive headaches, he added, could be treated with a cold footbath because it opens up the veins. For constipation, pour water over the abdomen while the patient is in a medium temperature half-bath. For epileptics, cold shower baths, but not too forceful. During seizures, doctors should try warm compresses on the head and genitals.²⁷⁵ He even said a temporary cure for hysteria was to use a warm wet pack and massage.²⁷⁶

The synopsis above indicates that mental health care was still an uncharted wilderness. The articles selected, and numerous ones that were not brought into this paper, advocated for more research, more data, more of pretty much everything except speculation. Mental health, like the rest of the medical profession, was in a pre-paradigmatic state. Writers cited here show that the legal system was ill-equipped to handle the mentally ill, the public at-large was prone to stigmatize people who would be disgraced by mental disease, and the professionals themselves were well aware that the practice en masse was still in incubation. In spite of the apparent internal strife among the

²⁷⁵ Peterson, 139.

²⁷⁶ Peterson, 140.

psychiatric profession and the admitted inefficacy of the asylum system, the halls continued to fill, the buildings expanded, and the system remained relatively intact.

CHAPTER VIII

MAIN CONTRIBUTIONS

At the close of this project, I have shown that the insane asylum and its social functions were routine topics in the daily newspaper, however the way they were covered is of interest: the page placement, the tone, the theme, the subject. I argue in this report that the insane asylum, and its vast social functions, was an excellent content generator for Gilded Age newspapers: one that spread across beats and sections. The asylum, as the institutional cognate to insanity, was ultimately a public service and therefore subject to public scrutiny and concern, thus it was under the purview of the daily newspapers as they discharged their duty to report on such matters. The asylum justified newspaper access to almost every American scene directly or indirectly involved with its ubiquitous function: the courtroom, the boardroom, the bedroom, the train station, the hospital, the state capitol. The newspaper followed the asylum, which followed insanity, which was omnipresent. Its reportage could be tagged under newspaper categories like politics, law, economics, lifestyle, crime, weather, society, religion, or even the local blotter.

Late 19th century journalists fulfilled the function of the fourth estate by keeping the asylum in constant view. They exposed corruption, embezzlement, malnourishment, beatings, and generally unsavory behavior conducted by public servants. Reporters also brought in stories of compassion, writing about the misfortunes of those committed and how they came to such circumstances. But where the newspapers contributed to mental illness stigma comes in part from what was reported and partly from what was omitted. The sanitarium was a ballooning public burden riddled with problems and the press covered those factors extensively. Those factors were likely enough to scare people from

ever wanting to be committed. Moreover, though, the newspaper coverage had little follow through. Stories of people being released/recovered were rare at best. Though recidivism and chronicity were real problems for the institutions, people did get released, and many recovered. However, this study shows that the press focused unevenly on the commitment to, and operations within, the asylum and only seldomly offered readers content about life afterward.

Mental hospitals, through the reportage, were tombs for the living; their identities stripped once inside, reduced to patient status. The press, itself a preeminent social institution, implicitly and sometimes explicitly proffered the notion that mental illness was a life sentence. The notion was likely shared among many anyway, and this isn't to say that the press created the stigma, but it didn't do much to challenge it either. On these grounds, this project finds that newspapers preferred a market where they traded in episodic and cynical content. This content helped to sell papers.

Newspapers, when covering insane asylums, operated in a nuanced contextual orbit. They printed stories that worked for the purposes of the enterprise. There were numerous occasions when the newspaper overlooked or omitted findings that appeared in secondary literature. For example, the dailies rarely covered Black or minority asylum-related stories while secondary literature shows that foreign migrants were some of the most highly committed peoples. Also, while asylums were largely populated by indigent and working-class patients, the papers focused most of their energies on reporting stories about people who were in the middle and upper classes.

Another area where the broadsheets strayed from what might appear to be commensurate coverage regarded female asylum patients. Women were presented in

news stories in a strict Victorian framework, often only being identified as wives or mothers. Again, this presentation omits a large swath of working and indigent women who made up the bulk of asylum patients. It was through these omissions of content that the news media showed their values. They wrote their ideal readers into the stories instead of covering the asylum more evenly. While the era was marked by papers trying to summon massive audiences, they mostly highlighted those classes of people that fit a certain social standard.

However, the subjects were not necessarily being celebrated. The news humanized, and made vulnerable, its subjects, showing that no one was immune to the possibility of being committed: the remnants of a childhood illness could take down a wealthy banker, consternation over religion could have a successful merchant committed, financial ruin could be another person's cause for insanity. Newspapers created a universe of information that challenged security and stability by showing the indiscriminate power of mental illness. No person, no matter how successful by social metrics, was impervious to insanity and/or the insane asylum. So, while the newspaper, in the context of asylum reporting, may not have comforted the afflicted, it certainly seemed to afflict the comfortable. But the coverage didn't afflict the comfortable by questioning elements of class struggle, privilege, or power, instead the news presented insanity and its correlates as insidious and arbitrary; the condition was a great equalizer among an ever-diversifying American population.

Like stories about commitment, the newspaper would omit and emphasize elements in the coverage of asylum functions. Omitted almost entirely were articles that covered the medical and scientific component of the asylum(s), ostensibly the most

crucial element. But that gap was filled by an elaborated emphasis on political, economic and sensational stories. For example, no articles in the study looked at the debate between physicians about the use of hysterectomy to cure “female troubles,” or the employment of hydrotherapy, or really any means of actual treatment. This is counterbalanced with myriad stories that placed the asylum in the middle of protracted partisan debates, or ones showcasing the degree of abuses suffered by patients in the institutions, or ones that meticulously followed court cases over insanity pleas and habeas corpus proceedings. The medical community was largely untouched by the newspapers; a significant gap in newspaper coverage when compared with other secondary literature that would suggest it to be newsworthy.

In the literature review, I argued that the newspaper and the insane asylum were joined in public service. Their goals were commensurate to the extent that they provided valuable work for the public. But, as this project closes, I’ve been trying to articulate a more aesthetic commonality between the two. The press and the insane asylum were both containers that neatly held within them a cornucopia of possibilities. The sanitarium, laid out with a central annex and abutting wings for patients, links intuitively with newspaper layout, with its front page and inside sections. Each story, offset with rules and lines was akin to the cells and offices of the asylum. The two institutions shared a common design theme, one that wasn’t attended to in this project but resonates nonetheless.

I also argued out front that the newspaper operated in its own universe of information, one that was fashioned to serve its own purposes, that used the content generated by the asylum but presented it in such a way as to chase its own ends. However, one of the most significant and fascinating findings of the project was that the

newspaper could be so many things to so many people. The press, in its Gilded Age form, was able to publish competing and contradictory stories without even having to justify the juxtaposition. To illuminate the previous claim, a newspaper could run a story about a “raving lunatic” being committed to the state asylum with no mention of the condition of the asylum; the implication being that the institution was fully capable of handling said patient. However, and sometimes even in the same issue, the paper would publish a story about patient abuses within, or embezzlement, or partisan wrangling over, the same asylum. It was the newspaper’s ability to disregard this apparent dissonance that makes it a rich source for historical inquiry.

The asylum, to the press, was a perennial problem and it fit readily into a frame that emphasized sensational details. The institution was often the last stop for “incurables” and “unfortunates.” It served functions that were outside of its scope: often a trough for otherwise untreatable people. Jails and almshouses would transfer dying patients to the insane asylum partly to make their own death rates look better. The asylum itself could rarely turn people away and floundered under the weight. Its problems were created and exacerbated by the volume and character of people sent into its dorms while the therapy it was created to employ had largely failed.

The United States was ballooning during the Gilded Age and the dominant Victorian value structure was very hard to operate within, especially for women, minorities, and immigrants from certain nations. Those people made up a large swath of asylum commitments however their stories were not told commensurately with the rates of internment. The mainstream daily press serviced their ideal reader, native-born white males, by featuring those people more prominently and with more detail than others.

I posit that the press omitted certain people from its pages because it would have been redundant to include them. By that I mean, hypothetically, that if the upper class already shared the belief that Chinese immigrants were anathema to American progress, then it would not be necessary for the press to publish a story that detailed a Chinese immigrant being sent to the asylum. However, in contrast, if a hardworking white college student went to the asylum because of prostration over his studies, well that seems to be a newsworthy event. The latter commitment is more of a grooming tool for the readers and has just a peppering of drama to make the story salient. The racism was not overt but insidious and operated through omission rather than explicit publication. The press didn't necessarily teach people about "others" as much as it seemed to reify standing opinions.

Detailed highlights from chapters

In order to present the material succinctly, I broke the findings into three areas that overlapped to some degree but still remained significant when treated individually. Those areas were commitment stories, operations stories, and themes. Most stories about the asylum were scored under commitment, or those that discussed people being committed in some form. The operations stories dealt with the function of the asylum and those stories focused on personnel, management, physicians, and patients. The final chapter explored themes within the coverage including the politics, economics, legal/policy content, sensationalism, and compassion. The last section illuminated the color of the content and allowed me to dive more deeply into the nuances of the reporting. The following is a truncated presentation of the findings from the chapters, though not exhaustive, it represents some of the more compelling findings of the report:

- **Page Placement:** Asylum stories were omnipresent in the daily paper. Because they weren't relegated to one or another beat, the stories could play in any position. An asylum story would land, on average, on the front page approximately once a week during the late 1800s, and similar articles would appear on inside pages every other day of the week. However, the stories could be generated from anywhere in the world and still land in the local paper. The material was rich enough that the press would use the wire, regularly, to scour for compelling stories from afar. Taken together, papers chose to publish more than a third of their operations stories from wire articles. The papers found it paramount to have content about the internal workings of asylums. Moreover, it was so important to have asylum operations articles that the one paper that didn't have a local asylum pulled the majority of its stories from elsewhere.
- **Framing:** Newspapers followed a predictable pattern around framing; stories about individuals were dominantly episodic whereas stories about the institution or related policies were thematically framed. Almost all (93.46%) commitment stories were framed around individuals as opposed to only four percent that focused on institutions or social problems. However, the majority of operations articles, were framed thematically (n=144, 61%), or didn't have a specific person on whom it focused but rather focused on public bodies or societal trends as its subject. This statistic shows an intuitive shift in framing approaches depending on the subject matter; the majority of the commitment articles were individually focused, or episodically framed. The bulk of operations articles were thematic,

there were still a significant amount of episodic operations stories published (n=53, 22%).

- Gender: Men were often reported as becoming mentally ill through external forces like medical issues or financial hardships whereas women were often made insane through more internal or personal problems like lost love or stress or family history according to newspaper reports. What emerges is a normative view of the sexes framed within the stories of insane asylum commitments. The *New York Evening World* featured men as the commitment subject almost three times (male 106, female 37) as often as females. Galveston and Chicago published about male subjects more than double the rate of female subjects and Salem was just under that mark.
- Ethnicity: In spite of a large immigrant population in asylums, relatively few stories actually covered immigrants or Blacks. Of the 535 commitment articles, just under 20 percent (n=105) of them mentioned immigrants as the subject of the article. Of those, the Western European demographic took up the lion's share at 64.71% (n=66), with African Americans far behind (10.78%, n=11), Asian (9.80%, n=10) and Eastern Europeans (7.61%, n=8) and two Mexican subjects mentioned (1.90%).
- Commitment capacity: Of the 237 operations articles, only 18 percent (n=42) actually spoke to the capacity of the asylums directly. However, 93 percent of those stories mentioned asylums as being full, crowded, or needing expansion. This study can posit that it was a routine function of press convention to cover the asylums, in terms of their capacity, as being in a constant state of

- bloating however it was rare for the news articles to actually conjecture as to the cause of such increases.
- Efficiency: All four papers described the hospitals as inefficient at a rate of 30 to 38 percent. The *Salem Statesman* was the outlier in this data set concerning dangerousness and efficiency. While the other three published stories marking asylums as dangerous at a rate of between 44 and 50 percent, the Statesman was only at 10 percent. Conversely, 36 percent of the Salem operations stories were scored as showing the state asylum to be efficient compared with the other three who were scored between 20 and 25 percent efficient articles..
 - Jurisdiction: Investigating the jurisdiction of the asylum being covered allowed this study to draw distinctions about the state of care for the varying asylums but also demonstrates that the papers had different relationships to the tiers of government. There were 225 operations articles where the jurisdiction was scored, of those, the majority were written about state-run hospitals (n=142, 63%) and less than a third were about municipal or county facilities (n=64, 28%) with a handful about either private ones or those located abroad (n=19, 8%). Of the *World's 50* operations articles, 17 of them were negative stories about the municipal asylums whereas only 10 were negative about the state asylum. Conversely, the *Tribune* was more evenly spread out. Of Chicago's 75 articles that were scored for a jurisdiction, eighteen were negative toward the state facilities and sixteen negative about the county asylums.
 - Policy and tone: Policy articles fared better in tone than many other types of content, legal or otherwise, as most of them (59%) were neutral in tone, with

positive articles (22%) ranking even higher than negative (19%) ones. This factor is in contrast even to the body of legally themed articles which were two thirds negative and just over a quarter neutral (27%) and far fewer of them positive (6%). This disparity shows that the newspapers either did not have enough intellectual capital to weigh in on the policies being proposed or they were less interested in sensationalizing policy stories.

Contribution to the field

This dissertation contributes an interdisciplinary offering to the fields of media studies, institutional and medical history and disability studies. This study combines journalism history with contemporary data analysis and collection methods while employing concepts that derive from critical theory and sociology. There are no studies that I found that interrogate the insane asylum through the lens of the daily newspaper. While numerous scholarly papers use the newspaper to substantiate claims about the asylum, none go as far as critiquing and analyzing the newspaper itself. This paper takes the position that the daily newspaper is a cultural product. As such it is subject to the forces of economics, politics, and personality. In other words, the press was not a silent and objective record of the asylum; it was a vehicle that served the needs of its owners, publishers, allies and readers. This project explores the priorities of the press as it related to the insane asylum, one of the most powerful and important social services of the time. Newspapers dominated the media landscape in the late nineteenth century and I have shown that they were at times critical, compassionate, and contradictory.

I set out to produce an exhaustive account of asylum news during a very specific era (1887-1895) as this was a time when asylums and newspapers were both rapidly increasing in commitments and circulation, respectively. What came of this approach was a report that showed the functional (page placement, wire usage, word count, etc.) components alongside some of the more qualitative details (theme, tone, jurisdiction, etc.) of the reportage. The press, using the insane asylum as a content generator, published details from every corner of American life and did so at times with literary zeal and at other times with an almost banal and perfunctory approach. What emerges though is the finding that the insane asylum was a nearly perfect arena for almost all news categories of the era: crime, politics, romance, scandal, and even weather.

The insane asylum was a sympathetic and amenable content generator for the press. This study shows the ways in which the sanitarium fit with standardized news packages: crime, politics, scandal. Furthermore, the insane asylum also allowed for more original reporting. Simply put, the newspapers could interrogate the American mind under the banner of public duty. Asylum commitments and operations gave the press a unique and compelling source of material. Newspapers practiced a pedestrian psychiatry for the readers, combining old world superstitions with fleeting understandings of the nascent psychotherapy field. So, while one person may have gone insane from religious mania, another was made mentally ill as a result of a decades-old childhood fever. The pliability of asylum content is what ultimately made it a near-perfect story engine for the press.

This study takes the 1887 Nellie Bly stunt investigation as an entry point. What results from the inquiry, however, is that the *World's* 10-column installment series was a

novel and risky approach to exposing content that had already been well-documented. The series was cross-promoted in the *Evening World and* mentioned a few times in other publications immediately after its publication, but basically vanished from the press conversation by the following year. Factoring out the investigation allows this research to approximate and recount the day-to-day asylum narratives; to recreate the body of information that readers ingested on a regular basis giving a sense of how the asylums were popularly discussed. The product of this work has been to show that the asylums were not simply represented in the newspaper as sites of abuse, neglect, and mismanagement. They were shown to be economic engines, partisan patronage vessels, community resources, and final destinations for many “unfortunates.”

Limitations

I went into this study with the advice from mentors and advisors telling me not to try to go too big. As such, I intentionally kept my site and sample population narrow and manageable, although there was still a momentous array of literature and primary analysis material. However, there were a number of areas where the study could have been broadened or gone into more detail without much more labor involved.

Chronology: this project was intentionally limited in the time period chosen and that rationale is argued in the opening chapters. However, given the methodology, it could have been broadened to include slices of data from adjacent eras. For example, the same panel of questions could have been employed for a study that also explored the 1860s and 1920s thereby creating a report that cross-compares content from different

eras. The following list represents a handful of limitations with the scope and approach of the study:

- Section naming: Because the material was collected through a series of screenshots around the chosen article(s), there was little information about the section from which each article was drawn. I did include page placement information but that data might be augmented and made richer with more information about the content section. For example, it would be enlightening to know if an article was located in a society section, or under religious news, or in the blotter.
- Headlines: For the sake of expediency and consistency, this study did not factor headlines into the data collection for quantitative analysis but did use some headline material in order to color the analysis. Had I created a tool for counting headlines, it may have also made the findings that much more poignant.
- Abutting stories: Throughout this project, the asylum stories were often placed next to seemingly unrelated and arbitrary stories. It would be fruitful for a media studies report to also have had a category for counting and qualifying what stories were placed above and below asylum-related stories. This would help to demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of the content as it seemed to fit in all parts of the paper.
- Additional commitment context: Though this project went into depth about the details of commitment stories, it would be worthwhile to also include data about whether the subject was out in the public, or at home. This data would be

especially useful in discussing the gender variations in commitments and their corresponding coverages.

Another area where I struggled in this study was access to consistent primary material from the various state archives. I had hoped to show correlations between factors like funding and political capital and newspaper coverage. The issue there was multifold. As I stated previously, access to Texas documents proved mostly fruitless as most of those had not yet been digitized and those that had were not comprehensive enough to draw any solid conclusions. For the other three states in the study, those documents also had their share of issues. Biennial reports were the most consistent sources of information relating to spending and policy priorities for the varying states but the published numbers tended to fluctuate because of the differing reporting methods. One report might have listed overall costs for asylums, while another report might have produced figures relating to solely state legislature payments to an asylum. The figures used in the study were only those that were reported consistently over time.

Future research

There are a number of areas where a body of future research informed by this project can be developed. The following is a short list of possibilities:

Commensurate Studies: Because of the usability of the methodological apparatus, the question form and the Qualtrics software could rather easily be used to interrogate asylum reporting in varying eras and studies of that nature would add to what has been started with this project.

Power Relationships: Another area of interest that fell outside the scope of this study would be to investigate the relationships between newspaper publishers and lawmakers and asylum superintendents. In the late nineteenth century, these three positions were very powerful. There is already a vault of material showing the overlap between lawmakers and asylum managers, but it would be worthwhile to investigate the relationship of those power brokers to newspaper managers. The case of the Oregon asylum was of particular interest because the city was relatively small but very powerful and the *Statesman* was a very close ally to the Republican statehouse. A study into the relationship between the *Statesman* publisher and the lawmakers could add more context to the nature of content published about the asylum and other powerful social services.

Alternative Newspapers: This study focuses on mainstream dailies on purpose, to get a baseline reading of how the insane asylum was presented to the “typical” reader. However, there is a rich area of content available to researchers who seek to interrogate asylum narratives in ethnic and alternative news publications. That area of work would potentially make for a valuable body of companion literature to mainstream news studies. Also, there were a handful of newspapers and publications that were written by asylum inmates. Those papers only ran a couple of years but should prove to contain fascinating historical material, especially in contrast to the mainstream findings.

APPENDIX

CODEBOOK:

Section 1: Article Stats

Coder	CD Code	LL Code
- CD	- yes	- yes
- LL		
- Other		

Article #	Date
Date Quarter	
- before 1887	- 1890Q1
- 1887Q1	- 1890Q2
- 1887Q2	- 1890Q3
- 1887Q3	- 1890Q4
- 1887Q4	- 1891Q1
- 1888Q1	- 1891Q2
- 1888Q2	- 1891Q3
- 1888Q3	- 1891Q4
- 1888Q4	- 1892Q1
- 1889Q1	- 1892Q2
- 1889Q2	- 1892Q3
- 1889Q3	- 1892Q4
- 1889Q4	- 1893Q1

Newspaper

- NY Evening Test
- Galveston Test
- Chicago Test
- Salem Test
- Conference NY
- Conference Galveston
- Conference Chicago
- Conference Salem

Location

- Front Page
- Inside Page

Wire: *determining whether a story is sourced locally or pulled from the wire. Local stories typically have no identifying datelines whereas wire stories will be prefaced with “special” or will state the city of origin that is outside of the jurisdiction of the newspaper. Some wire stories will also indicate that they were originally published in another newspaper. Any news story outside of the home region for the paper mark wire/non-local.*

- Local
- Wire/Non-local

Word Count: *not including head and subhead, body copy only. If there are blurbs about asylums, just count the words in the article being scored.*

- Less than 50
- 50-200
- 200-500
- More than 500

Section 2: Article Judgments

Subject Internment: *When the story is about a person or persons being committed*

- yes
- no

Subject Operations: *Story is about the operations of the asylum; superintendent being replaced, new boiler installed, growth of the facility, etc.*

- yes
- no

Subject Policy: *state and county level policy changes, or calls for policy changes*

- Yes

-No

Subject Investigation/Wrongdoing: *this could be an alleged wrongdoing, a state investigation, a proposed investigation, abuse of/by an inmate or attendant*

- yes

-No

Subject Death: *death in, or caused by, the asylum or the mental illness subsequent to asylum*

- Yes

-No

Subject Release/Recovery: *Article discusses a committed person being released as recovered or improved*

- Yes

-No

Subject Insanity as Defense: *typically in court proceedings, used prior to commitment to an asylum*

- Yes

-No

Subject False Imprisonment: *if alleged or decided*

- Yes

-No

Subject Indeterminate

- Yes

-No

Frame

- Neither: *not one or the other is clearly dominant*

- Episodic: If the story is primarily about the individual(s) and does not cover larger societal or institutional topics

- Thematic: *if the story is primarily about the institution, politics, society, etc.*

Should not be focused on individual actions but issues from the institutional level up

Internment Male: *if an internment story, count the number of males listed as being committed. Do not count ancillary people such as sheriff, police, doctor, etc.*

-0

-1

-2

-3

-4+

Internment Female: *if an internment story, count the number of females listed as being committed. Do not count ancillary people such as sheriff, police, doctor, etc.*

-0

-1

-2

-3

-4+

Operations Male: *if an operations story, count the number of males listed as being committed.*

-0

-1

-2

-3

-4+

Operations Female: *if an operations story, count the number of females listed as being committed.*

- 0
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4+

Ethnicity/Race

- not mentioned
- African American
- Native American
- Western European
- Eastern European
- Mexican
- Asian
- other
- N/A

Theme

- Economic: *if the article is about economic issues, typically these would be articles that primarily discuss the finances of the asylum, or the finances of the state and include the asylum as a major line item*

- Political: *if the article is about the politics of the asylum generally; could be about a new policy being enacted, or about the partisan nature of building a new asylum*

- Compassionate: *the article is attempting to evoke sympathy for an individual or a group of people; those poor “unfortunates” for example. A rudimentary article about a committal would not qualify as compassionate. The article is trying to evoke sympathy for the individuals or groups.*

- Legal: *typically, about a court case, or official investigation. An alleged lawsuit or legal action would score in this category. So, the allegation and the actual litigation would count the article as legal.*

- Spectacle: for those articles that are merely spectacles; the inmate believes he is a piece of corn and is terrified of chickens. If the article mentions a delusion that could be considered real, then do not score as a curiosity. For example, if a person believes they are entitled to a fortune although they are destitute with no prospects, that would not qualify as a spectacle. However, if the person believes they are the president of the United States, that would qualify.

Indeterminate:

Tone

	Negative	Neutral	Positive
Score from negative to positive	- 2	0	+2

Negative: *Should a death take place, or if the author indicates a superlatively derogatory stance on the patient or institution; or pessimistic about condition of person mentioned, their ability to coexist in society, the condition of the asylum or the politics surrounding the institution. Not fatal or harsh, but more simply disparaging.*

Neutral: *perfunctory message about routine goings-on within or about the asylum; a new superintendent, a routine committal with no emotive language to cue optimism or pessimism, a new policy with no editorial slant about its perceived functionality*

Positive: *a committal story that indicates the person will likely recover, a new policy expected to help many people, an employee that has done well, a treatment that has proven effective;*

Or superlatively optimistic or approving; a charity dance for the asylum inmates, a generous gift for inmate(s), a recovered, or improved, person released, a policy that has changed conditions for the better.

Danger

- Not Mentioned

- Not Dangerous

- Dangerousness to others: *if the “other” is mentioned in the article*
- Dangerousness to self: *this includes information about a suicide that had already occurred.*

- Dangerousness to self and others
- Other
- N/A

Attribution for Insanity

- not mentioned
- gender
- race
- finances: *if it is alleged that the person is insane due to finances, loss of fortune or looking to reap a fortune*
- weather
- urbanization
- familial history
- personal loss/Love: *this hybrid category is for personal loss, be it a failed love or the death of a loved one. Not necessarily for love by itself, but the majority of love related insanity cases are for unrequited love.*
- religion
- guilt
- medical/Soft Brain/Paresis
- drugs/alcohol/Intemperance/Tobacco

- Age
- Masturbation
- Female Troubles
- Trauma/Victim of violence
- Stress
- Other
- N/A

Asylum Capacity

- not mentioned
- full/Crowded/needs expansion
- vacancy
- other
- N/A

Asylum Description

- Dangerous: *if danger is alleged or proven, or being investigated. Could be scored for any of the subject scoring above. (Commitment article could have an inmate alleging the danger of the asylum, operations article could demonstrate attendant being abusive, or a fire that burnt down almost an entire ward).*

- Efficient: *rare but some articles will mention that their per capita costs are down, their release rates are up, the death rate is down, the building is now secured*

against fires because of a new plumbing system, etc. Also, those articles that praise the work of a doctor or attendant.

- Inefficient: *an article that talks about the crowded conditions of the asylum, the incompetent wards or superintendent*

- Other

- Not Mentioned

- N/A

Too easy to commit: *some articles will lament the porous nature of the commitment process but they would have to explicitly mention something to this effect. A simple article about a judge issuing a commitment order isn't enough to substantiate a score here. However, if the article is about someone alleging false imprisonment because of how easy it is to commit someone, score this variable*

- Mentioned/Alleged

- N/A

Asylum Corrupt: *a number of articles that discuss the politics of the asylum will allege that the asylum is part of a larger graft/patronage system because of such-and-such political party. Articles will allege, or quote allegations, of sweetheart appointments for the governor's lackey.*

- Mentioned/Alleged

- N/A

Mental Condition

- not mentioned
- Hysteria
- Depression/Melancholy
- Insanity
- Idiocy
- Epilepsy
- lunacy
- senility
- Dementia
- Paranoia/Delusional
- Mania
- Imbecility
- monomania
- Paresis
- Improved/Recovered
- Other
- N/A

Named: *score named/unnamed for all articles, operations or commitment alike.*

The idea here is to show how public the asylum was in the eyes of the newspaper.

- Named

- Unnamed

- N/A

Rate of Insanity Mentioned: *this question asks about whether the author is commenting generally on social, state, local or local trends. Some might say that the asylums will need to expand, or that insanity rates are rising*

- Increasing

- Decreasing

- Level

- Other

- Not Mentioned

- N/A

False Imprisonment

- Alleged

- N/A

Recovery Mentioned

- Not Mentioned

- Likely to Recover/Recovered

- Unlikely to Recover

- N/A

Profession Mentioned: *when referring to committals, N/A if simply referring to asylum operations workers*

- White Collar: *doctor, lawyer, financier, royalty or the relation of royalty.*
- Blue Collar: *Employees or trade workers.*
- Unemployed
- Entertainer: *writers, actors, performers*
- Store Owner
- Religious Worker
- Wife/Mother
- Military: *if no current profession is mentioned but the individual is described as having been a soldier, mark this*
- Laborer: *should be listed specifically as this was considered an employment category in the era*
- Farmer/Miner
- Housekeeper
- Other
- Not Mentioned
- N/A

Committing Party: *the initiator of the committal. If friends initiated and the judge approved it, score it under friends/loved ones. If only the judge or the sheriff are mentioned, for example, score it accordingly*

- Friends/Loved Ones
- Authorities (police/judge/jury)
- Medical Professional
- Other
- Not Mentioned
- N/A

Property: *in regard to property of the committed person. If asserted, proven or alleged. Often, the allegation is toward a family member or friend of the committed person.*

- Claimed by state
- Claimed by friend or relative
- N/A

Abuse/Death: *this would refer to the death of a committed person, either alleged or determined. These are often the bases for investigations but not exclusively.*

- By Attendant(s)
- By Inmate

- Suicide

- N/A

Thumbnail Article: if the article is noteworthy, do indicate it as such in this column so I can collect it for narrative usage

- yes

- No

Hospital Jurisdiction: *virtually all of the Salem articles will be state because the state didn't have municipal or county asylums. However, Chicago had a number of county asylums and state asylums, Elgin and Kankakee in Illinois are state asylums whereas Jefferson and Cook were county asylums. In New York, New York County (Blackwells) was county whereas Buffalo, Utica, Rochester were state. Kings(if specifically mentioned because Kings was converted from county to state in the era) is on a case by case and it may not say explicitly so mark unknown. Texas had the state asylum in Austin and had erected a new one in Terrell. The Galveston Daily doesn't often mention the county and municipal asylums.*

- State

- County/Municipal

- Other

- Unknown

- N/A

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