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Chapter One: Introduction, Theoretical Frames and Methodology

In the spring of 1858, the readers of New York City’s Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper were met with a series of shocking news illustrations that would be a popular point of conversation for some time. The front page on the May 8 edition featured a full-page illustration of a ghastly scene outside of a Brooklyn dairy stable. The nearly full-page image shows, in unprecedented detail, a cow lying limp on the ground as two men drag the animal by a rope around its neck outside through the stable doorway (Figure 4-1). In the illustration the cow’s tongue is hanging out, a sign to the viewer that this animal is dead. Two other men look on; one is nonchalantly leaning in the doorway. At a glance, the depiction of these relaxed onlookers suggests that hauling dead cows out of the stable might be routine. The caption below the front-page illustration provided some context of what is happening: “EXPOSURE OF THE MILK TRADE. –DRAGGING OUT A DEAD COW, JUST AFTER MILKING, FROM THE STABLES CONNECTED WITH THE DISTILLERY ... FROM A DRAWING MADE ON THE SPOT BY OUR OWN ARTIST.”

“Exposure of the milk trade” was Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper’s visual news introduction to what was known as “swill milk,” the milk associated with urban

\[\text{May 8, 1858}\]
dairy production. Swill milk was a business model that reused distillery “swill” to feed dairy cows housed in dark, overcrowded city stables, as opposed to pasture-raised, grass-fed cows. Because the city’s population was growing at an exponential rate for the better part of the nineteenth century, keeping up with demand for milk was difficult, and this situation encouraged mass production methods of harvesting milk for public consumption. But the distillery-stable owners were accused of keeping unclean, foul-smelling stables that were a nuisance in the city. In Leslie’s pictorial exposé on swill milk, the milk from these swill-fed cows was situated as a menace to public health and was blamed for thousands of deaths, mostly among the youngest and poorest inhabitants of New York City. While harvest and delivery of this milk had been going on for years, the production and distribution was left unimpeded by the local government, despite its alleged dangers. And Leslie’s was not even the first to publish the problems of swill milk before the public. Scientific books had been published warning of the dangers of “unnatural methods” of producing milk, and newspapers reported on the practice as early as the 1840s.

Despite the previous reporting on the dangers of swill milk in New York newspapers, it was not until publisher and editor Frank Leslie used his team of reporter-

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4 For example, see Robert M. Hartley, Historical, Scientific and Pratical Essay on Milk. (New York: Jonathan Leavitt, 1842). In 1853 the New York Times called attention to the issue in an article titled “Death in a Jug” that critiqued the poor quality of life in the city. Also see Bee Wilson, Swindled: From Poison Sweets to Counterfeit Coffee: The Dark History of the Food Cheats (London: John Murray, 2008), 154-155.
artists to investigate and render illustrated news images that gave the problem widespread public exposure in his illustrated newspaper. Week after week during the spring and summer of 1858, Leslie filled his weekly newspaper with on-the-spot drawings, scientific illustrations, and later editorial cartoons produced by his artist-reporters. He reported that cows were malnourished and diseased, full of ulcers and sores and toothless as a result of their filthy living conditions and mistreatment by the men working in the stables. The milk coming from cows in such wretched physical condition living in filth could hardly produce milk healthy enough for human consumption.

This dissertation is a full-scale examination of Frank Leslie’s swill milk reports. My research seeks to reveal how Leslie’s pictorial journalism constructed a unique narrative about the dangers of swill milk to the public’s health. It is not a new argument that Leslie’s pictorial exposé increased public awareness of the swill milk issue and forced the hand of public officials to investigate the business. However, despite the existence of a few books and articles that refer to Leslie’s swill milk reports, no in-depth analysis of this pictorial exposé has been conducted as a way to understand the nature of this new way to communicate news in pictures. I argue that visual reporting in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* about swill milk offered a new narrative about this public

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health crisis; the pictorial content in his newspaper reached audiences and spoke to community concerns in ways that the written word alone did not and could not. One contribution this research offers is a new and original examination of Leslie’s as a forerunner to modern visual journalism by demonstrating how “swill milk” was presented as public health issue to readers. My research makes innovative connections about visual journalism’s impact on the nineteenth century public and early formations of public health narratives in the press. In addition, I present an analysis of the public reaction to Leslie’s pictorial expose and the official city investigations on the swill milk business that were prompted by Leslie’s reporting.

In the existing scholarship, opinions are divided on whether Leslie’s swill milk investigation resulted in any real reform. Historian John Duffy concludes that Leslie’s investigation of swill milk had little effect on the urban milk industry: “The only success in the fight against swill milk has resulted from his newspaper’s crusade, which had forced the stable owners to clean their premises and get rid of diseased cows.”6 Budd Leslie Gambee, Jr. put it more positively: “Though the progress of reform was slow, Frank Leslie himself had become a hero who had fearlessly attacked civic corruption ‘on behalf of the mothers and children of New York.’”7 Gambee continues by saying that Leslie’s pictorial campaign against swill milk restored his fledging newspaper, which had

been struggling since its inception in 1855, to Leslie’s original purpose — to introduce the power of pictorial journalism.⁸

Antebellum journalism is often characterized as mainly political, elite and partisan in nature.⁹ But Leslie’s is an early example of the shift away from this kind of newspaper toward an institution that reflected changes in society. Newspapers began to reach what could be characterized as a “mass audience” in part to mechanical innovation, economic shifts and social changes that included literacy improvement through formalized education, political enfranchisement and urbanization. As newspapers became more entwined in day-to-day living among larger groups of people, media representations increasingly informed worldviews. More people understood themselves and those around them as part of a larger community of individuals, albeit in a mediated, or symbolic, way.

Understanding Leslie’s pictorial campaign against swill milk as an innovation in journalism, I connect Leslie’s pictorial crusade to the early formation of the public health movement in mid-nineteenth century America. New York City was a struggling metropolis coping with unprecedented population growth, and the swill milk problem was one manifestation of the problems associated with urbanization. The central research questions I address include the following: How did the illustrations in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper construct the story about the “swill milk industry” to the public in pictures? What storytelling devices, such as tropes and symbols, were used to construct a

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⁸ Ibid., 93.
visual narrative about swill milk to the public? What was the press’ reaction to Leslie’s pictorial campaign, and can public attitudes about swill milk be traced in mid-nineteenth century culture? How did the information communicated in these illustrations help shape the worldview of a growing population of readers and about the idea of “public health” in mid-nineteenth century New York?

Going beyond the existing scholarship, I make a case that the production and publication of these illustrations agitated the public and captivated not only the residents of New York City but also across the Unites States, especially in Northern states and territories. Leslie also changed the conversation about swill milk and amplified the swill milk business as blight on the city, on civic progress, and on the public’s health. Leslie, through carefully crafted images, personalized the issue further, directly connecting the production of swill milk with disease and death. The daily newspapers had reported on the problem previously, and city investigations had been conducted, as early as 1854.\textsuperscript{10} However, the problem was often positioned as a public nuisance issue. Leslie, using a variety of visual techniques, including realism, scientific drawings and information graphics, presented swill milk as a public health crisis that could no longer be ignored.

I analyze Leslie’s illustrations and, when applicable, the accompanying text associated with the illustrations. I also ascertain public reaction through news coverage in other newspapers of Leslie’s investigation, advertisements, letters to the editor, and other contemporary documents. I use historical and visual methods to conduct my examination

guided by theories that explain the making of media power and its ability to make meaning. This cultural history will contribute new knowledge about early visual journalism efforts in the United States.\(^\text{11}\) Using *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* as my principal artifact, my analysis places an emphasis on the illustrations to show how this newspaper presented a new form of journalistic storytelling. *Leslie’s* illustrations introduced visual news standards in the American news industry, and my work will expand the scholarship and broaden our understanding of the Antebellum illustrated newspaper.

Although some academic writing exists about the nineteenth-century illustrated press, many researchers have called for more scholarship about this topic and its broader relationship to the history of print culture. Although journalism and mass communication scholars, for their part, are more apt to study the *written* texts from historical newspapers of this period, this dissertation contributes to the scholarship that values *illustrated* work for its own aesthetic importance and its role in journalism.\(^\text{12}\) Illustrations created during this era can easily be found in history books, for example, but their purpose is often to exemplify a particular place and time with no further analysis of the visual artifact for its own intrinsic value.\(^\text{13}\) Because halftone methods were not used to reproduce photographs on newsprint until 1880, in order to publish images in the newspaper, a press had to

\(^{11}\) Those who have written about the nineteenth century illustrated press include Kevin G. Barnhurst, Joshua Brown, Budd L. Gambee Jr., William H. Huntzicker, Chris Lamb, Frank Luther Mott, Madeleine B. Stern and W. Fletcher Thompson. Other notable work on the illustrated press includes Andrea G. Peterson, Patricia Andersen and Bert Hansen’s work studying medical images.


\(^{13}\) Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America*. 
employ persons with the skills to draw and engrave images for reproduction (often referred to as engravings). Frank Leslie, a trained engraver and illustrator himself, employed “special artists” to gather visual information to reproduce in his newspaper. Scholars refer to Leslie as a “pioneer” in illustrated journalism; he is credited with advancing the technological process used in nineteenth-century illustrated publication.\textsuperscript{14}

In mid nineteenth-century America, the use of visual images brought about new ways of organizing, observing, reproducing and transmitting news and information.\textsuperscript{15} According to Michael Wilson, the expansion of capitalism, urbanization and changing gender roles endure in these illustrations.\textsuperscript{16} Wilson suggests that historical uses of illustrations and other images are too often “decorative” to show the “flavor” of the period under study; the images themselves are not analyzed — for their own sake or in relation to the printed text — and often are not contextualized.\textsuperscript{17} Scholarship about visual journalism has a tendency to favor photography, television and graphic design as primary sources with a growing body of contemporary studies that focus on the Internet.\textsuperscript{18} As a result, the value of these early American newspaper illustrations and their important role in generating a new form of journalism has gone largely unexamined. Furthermore, while

\textsuperscript{15} John Tagg, The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). Tagg includes a series of essays about the rise of the photographic image in the nineteenth century, which is instructive to this dissertation concerned with illustrations as news in the pictorial press.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{18} Cultural Studies has facilitated these areas of inquiry.
New York’s swill milk crisis is mentioned in several public health histories, almost no scholarship exists that connects this important public health event with the visual reporting of the crisis in Leslie’s illustrated newspaper.19

How can one justify a scholarly work that argues for the uniqueness of media images as separate and distinct from text-based news? There are several ways. Before an infant can speak or read, most can see and understand objects and pictures. Of our five senses, visual scholars argue that seeing is the one sense that provides us with the most detailed information about our world. Because it is straightforward to take in visual stimuli to understand the world, often what we see is taken for granted.20 However, because many of the illustrations in Leslie’s were published with additional information, images will also be analyzed with the written text that appeared in the form of an image caption or “cut-line” and the written reports. Written information often provides additional context for any image, and can “anchor who or what is depicted or what is symbolized,” as explained by the authors of Handbook of Visual Analysis.21

These illustrations were the next best thing that newspaper and magazine proprietors had to reproduce reality at the time. Claims were made in the written content in Leslie’s that the work of reporter-artists represented the “truth.” When one reads the

19 Bert Hansen, “The Image and Advocacy of Public Health in American Caricature and Cartoons from 1860 to 1900,” American Journal of Public Health 87, no. 11 (1997). Hansen provides the only example that I was able to recover that specifically studied newspaper images and public health. His article directly addresses news images and public health. He cites in his abstract that his paper does not address the “reportorial depictions of events the news and the neutral illustrations of methods and machines in scientific and technical publications.”


content in *Leslie’s*, it is evident that great care was taken to convince the reader that the reporter-artist was “there” and “on-the-spot” to capture these moments as realistically as possible. They imply that these illustrations are factual, truthful and represent something that once existed. We simply cannot know if these illustrations truthfully represented reality, but that is beside the point. My concern is with what was presented as truth within the pages of *Leslie’s* and what was communicated to readers through visual techniques of storytelling.

The idea that Leslie was providing factual, realistic news illustrations conflicts with the position that the authors of *The Form of News* take on the matter. Kevin G. Barnhurst and John Nerone content that the “regime of the illustrated news did not point to photographic realism or to any other notion of unmediated realism. Instead, it insisted on clarity and lucidity. The images were expected to articulate, not independently of course because the typographic text usually was indispensable, but certainly when amplified or contextualized by accompanying verbal reportage.”

First, as my analysis will show, one did not need to be literate to understand, on some level, what Leslie was communicating in his visual depictions of the dark side of the swill milk business. Second, while Barnhurst and Nerone’s statement is not in opposition to a paradigm of realism in the illustrated press, it neglects to interrogate the claims of the intent or authorship of illustrations in this context. Leslie’s statement of authenticity and realism

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needs to be considered. Whether or not the illustrations are, in fact, iconic representation of reality is another matter entirely.

I also contend that, in addition to Leslie’s contributions to early visual journalism, his investigation of swill milk helped build the future agenda for public health policy in New York City and, later, the nation. The concept of public health was relatively new at this time and took form in government efforts to control outbreaks of disease through quarantine and sanitary work. While the abolition of swill milk had a lot of support from the medical community, as Paul Starr explains, before the U.S. Civil War, an “ambivalent relationship of private practitioners to public health” limited the role of government in developing public health initiatives. Because no permanent municipal body existed to deal with public health issues in Antebellum New York City, local and state authorities efforts to limit disease outbreaks and quarantine citizens happened on an ad-hoc basis. A permanent municipal body to deal with public health would not materialize until after the Civil War with the establishment of the Metropolitan Board of Health in 1866.  

As this dissertation explains, it is highly suspect that swill milk, on its own, killed those who consumed it. Widely held theories at the time explained the cause and spread of disease were often erroneous. Many understood the root of disease and sickness as a lack of piety, but religious explanations were yielding to emerging scientific thought. As science and scientific inquiry advanced, technological tools helped advance new explanations to understand the cause of sickness and disease. Leslie’s illustrated content

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also reproduced scientific images as evidence to help bolster his argument that swill milk was poison. There were two scientific publications that principally informed Leslie’s understanding of swill milk and in his pictorial exposé on the industry. An 1852 pamphlet published by social reformer John Mullaly cautioned against the use of swill milk and reported on its dangerous properties. An article about Mullaly’s publication in the New York Tribune lamented, “Convincing Lectures have been given and reported; Editorials and Communications by the acre have been published; but the great body of consumers of Swill Milk rarely attend Lectures and seldom read (or heed) newspapers.”24 If what the Tribune claims to be true — that the problem of swill milk was well known — why had nothing been done to eliminate the problem? Widespread bribery of city officials by swill milk stable and distillery owners was the conventional explanation for this lapse; additionally, the elite classes were disconnected from the problems of the average city dweller and could afford to import milk, that was presumably pure and wholesome, from the country.25

While the focus of this dissertation is not about questioning the nutritional value of milk, it does concern how Leslie and his newspaper made milk an important issue in efforts to improve the health of the public.26 The very idea that cow’s milk was an indispensible part of one’s diet, especially for children, remained practically

25 Egan, “Organizing Protest in the Changing City: Swill Milk and Social Activism in New York City, 1842–1864.”
unchallenged. Even today, milk is considered to be an essential component to promote the health and development of children. As Anne Mendelson, author of *Milk: The Surprising Story of Milk Through the Ages*, explains, the medical profession at the time recommended milk to children and adults alike for healthful living. Some doctors went as far as to call milk a “miracle food” that held the cure to many diseases: “There were ‘milk cures’ that had patients in sanatoria gulping six quarts a day for six weeks before returning to society (according to adherents) a state of restoration.”

The Victorian mindset favored cow’s milk for the children whose mothers were considered unfit to breastfeed. Furthermore, middle-class and well-to-do women were often considered emotional and fragile and therefore too weak to supply sufficient nutrients to their children through their own breast milk.

Leslie’s desire to publish a timely, news-oriented illustrated newspaper distinguished his publication from other illustrated periodicals of the period in America. Despite competition from the well-established Harper Brothers publishing house, *Leslie’s* survived when competing illustrated newspapers did not. As a pioneer in the field, Leslie and his associates contributed to visual conventions and standards that we take for granted today. Historian Joshua Brown calls Leslie’s swill milk series a pivotal moment for his the publication that attracted new readers and “signaled a turn to a new activist

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policy in pictorial reporting.” Brown explains the impact of this new form of news:
“The [illustrated] paper’s contribution to reporting lay in its rapid visualization of the
topical and in its transformation of news into a detailed pictorial narrative provided by a
new type of journalist, the artist-reporter or ‘special artist.’”

Arguably, Leslie’s work was ostensibly an extension of a reform movement.
Reformers like Mullaly and later Robert M. Hartley, to be discussed in detail later, would
lead the charge against swill milk, and their efforts were linked to the larger temperance
movement. Protestant, middle-class temperance reformers rallied against the swill milk
industry as a battle against the liquor industry as much as, if not more than, than a battle
against swill milk. This was an effort to more tightly control the whiskey business that
produced the distillery slop fed to the cattle more than to relieve the diseased cows of
their bondage in urban stables or rid the city of the “poisonous” milk they produced.

This era also witnessed major changes in U.S. print culture. Newspaper reading
shifted from aimed at elites to one that grew larger and targeted a mass audience. A
growing middle class culture demanded news about their changing world. Rapidly
changing industrial culture brought about mass production that mechanized the
manufacture of goods and services, including the products from the publishing industry.
Mass production allowed for the distribution of images to new audiences at a pace
previously unimaginable. And as part of the larger print culture, the illustrated press

31 Brown, Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America, 32-33.
32 Egan, “Organizing Protest in the Changing City: Swill Milk and Social Activism in New York City, 1842–
1864,” 211.
functioned as a democratizing force, bringing about the industrialization of information, delivering news and information to the middle class citizens, and many from this population were engaging with public issues for the first time and on a more regular basis. Leslie’s illustrated newspaper would encompass trends in appealing to the “common man” in the Jacksonian era that began with the penny papers of the 1830s. And pictorial content does not require the ability to read to communicate meaning, just the ability to see. That also would have captured a wider audience than written accounts about swill milk, or public lectures were only a certain class of people would have been welcome.

Media historian David Paul Nord helps explain my epistemological approach to studying the past: “The goal is not to generalize, but to illuminate. Experience, not generalizations, is what the humanities have to offer to human understanding.” This approach offers a process to craft an analytical narrative through close readings of source materials and to interrogate and interpret this unique episode in United States journalism history. I organize resources in such a way that allows me to examine and explain the period under examination and connect supporting texts (both images and written materials) to structure a cohesive research study. One goal of my project is to contribute new perspectives and insights about the U.S. illustrated press and its relationship to early attempts to visualize news through pictorial content. I also provide evidence to suggest

33 Brown, Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America, 22-23.
that that *Leslie’s* was a pioneer of visual journalism by providing new narratives through illustrated content.

**Key Theoretical Concepts**

In today’s image-saturated world, it is difficult to imagine a time when mass media images were in short supply. But the ubiquity of images today does not reflect the experience of the average person in the mid-nineteenth century. Frank Leslie began publishing his illustrated newspaper in the context of changing literary rates, advances in print reproduction technology, and urban trending concentrating the population. Together, these trends provided a space for printed materials to enter a marketplace primed for their acceptance. A mass audience was consuming media representations that portrayed life on the streets in periodicals like *Leslie’s*. Scholars who study this period in history position this emerging print culture as a modernizing force that rearranged social order and shifted perceptions of life as it was known. The mass-produced images included in this social change steadily increased in volume and spread beyond the elite audiences to the working- and middle-class for the first time. These mass media allowed people from a wide range of backgrounds — from factory owners, middle-class merchants and working-class laborers — to share similar experiences. Furthermore, iconic pictorial reproductions of news offered readers new and unique ways to understand their changing world.

Scholars of the illustrated press agree that Leslie — editor, illustrator and publisher — is the “father” of American pictorial reporting. Born Henry Carter in Ipswich, Suffolk, England in 1821, Leslie arrived in 1848 to New York City illustration as a young adult, trained in engraving, to pursue illustrated publishing in the United States. He took “Frank Leslie” for his American moniker and held a series of jobs with other struggling illustrated periodicals before he started his own publishing empire in 1854. He first established himself in women’s fashion publications to build enough capital to start his flagship publication, Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, one year later. In the beginning, Leslie targeted a wide audience for financial survival, and his audience grew larger as the demand for illustrated news grew.

The illustrated press was at its peak from about the 1840s to the 1880s. Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper was a part of a larger movement in popular culture of a marketplace inundated with printed materials. Advances in printing technologies, cheaper raw materials and a growing audience all together helped grow a marketplace of ideas and the rise of mass culture. Readers could easily understand and relate to the visual storytelling devices that Leslie’s used to report on swill milk. These drawings emphasized shared experiences including death and disease associated with the consequences of a city growing too fast. The images were detailed, realistic and often horrific. Dreadful images of urban dairy cows, sleazy depictions of urban dairymen and empathetic representations

36 See Brown, Gambee and Huntzicker’s on Leslie and the early illustrated press.
37 For a detailed biography of Frank Leslie, see Gambee.
of poor citizens who consumed swill milk were all a part of the larger visual storyline. In contrast to the harm associated with urbanization, romantic illustrations of pastoral living conjure Jeffersonian ideals that draw attention to the advantages of country living. These positive rural illustrations idealized depictions of a life on the farm. Together, Leslie’s pictorial reporting offered new ways of understanding life in the city that were different from stories in words. Although we know little about the relationship between early media crusades and the public’s response, this research on Leslie’s swill milk exposé contributes new knowledge about media representations of public health problems: the narratives made available to the public, and the public and government officials’ responses to visual reporting.

Like a news illustration, when a picture is reproduced and transmitted, the meaning becomes, according to John Berger, “transmittable; that is to say an illustration becomes information of a sort, and, like all information, it is either put to use or ignored; information carries no special authority within itself.”39 For this dissertation, I understand media and their messages as a part of a meaning-making system inextricable from historical, social, political and cultural contexts. The illustrations in Leslie’s I examine as media artifacts are positioned in the broader social context in which they were produced and disseminated. This method allows a more robust examination to discover their full meaning-making potential.40

40 Ibid.
Newspapers as Community and Constructing Reality for Readers

Historian Benedict Anderson makes the case in *Imagined Communities* by explaining that the press can function as a form of consciousness among people. The press enables people to “imagine” themselves as members of a larger community.\(^4\) His print-capitalism thesis informs how newspapers as a communication tool foster an “imagined community” of people who would otherwise never meet.\(^2\) As in the case of the swill milk exposé, Leslie’s communicated news in pictures to people who imagined themselves as part of a larger New York City community. This press function makes the study of visual reporting developments even more important, since visual images likely facilitated a person’s sense of connection to others more quickly than the printed word. How did that work to normalize — or challenge — conceptions of public health and the government’s responsibility to help those in need? To begin to answer this question requires study of the visual images, newspapers, editors, artists and institutions responsible for the visual content that helped create a new way of communicating news.

As a cultural practice, James Carey explains how newspapers influence and structure people’s lives through the concept of “ritual.”\(^3\) Similar to Anderson’s thesis, a ritual view of the press understands media power through the messages that maintain and represent our shared beliefs as a society. Newspaper reading as ritual can help maintain

\(^{42}\) Ibid.
\(^{43}\) Communications historian James Carey is often associated with an American version of cultural studies that is sometimes compared with the British tradition exemplified by Williams and Hall (among others). Rather than being at odds with one another, both the British and American versions of cultural studies — broadly speaking — are concerned about life under capitalism. While both schools problematize power differently, I see the differences as complementary rather than in conflict.
and organize society by communicating certain ideas that allow people who will otherwise never meet to experience a sense of belonging to the same culture. Under a ritual view of communication, news is not simple the communication of information but rather a drama. Carey explains, “It [news] does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historian time; and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it.”

Certainly, Leslie tapped into quite a drama with his illustrated reporting of the swill milk business.

Understanding media power as constituting both an “imagined community” and “ritual,” I study Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper as a medium of communication that functioned to create, maintain and negotiate a particular idea of what was happening in the city of New York. Media can serve as a bridge to join members of otherwise socially and physically disparate cultures together. In the case of Leslie’s exposé, for example, despite their vast socio-economic differences, the poor who lived in the crowded, tenement housing in the Five Points neighborhood shared the same news with those living lavishly in upper-class Brownstones. Through urbanization, as these otherwise physically separated classes of people were encroaching on each other’s terrain, the role of the newspaper would serve to help otherwise unequal classes to have a mediated understanding of one another’s circumstances.

In Nord’s collection of articles published in the book titled *Communities of Journalism: A History of Newspapers and Their Readers*, he explores models of journalism that inform how we understand newspapers as community-building entities. Newspapers are but one of many institutions that structure daily life, but newspapers in and of themselves they do not build community. Rather, “the newspaper… provides the factual materials for others to do so.”\(^{46}\) But these “factual materials,” of course, are filtered through constructs that newspapers provide. Frank Leslie, in choosing “swill milk” as an issue that the public needed to know about, offered a certain narrative about the problem that captivated the public and framed swill milk as a poison that killed.

**Culture, Ideology and Hegemony**

The concept of culture is a central theoretical frame in this dissertation. Cultural historian Raymond Williams defines culture as a blend of an “informing spirit” that constitutes way of life and “a whole social order” where culture not only reflects but also constitutes the shared values of a group or society.\(^{47}\) Furthermore, Williams’ definition of culture is also the byproduct of intellectual and artistic activity.\(^{48}\) Using a combination of the definitions, John Storey explains how culture can be expanded to mean a signifying system.\(^{49}\) Quoting Williams, Storey explains culture as a “signifying system through


\(^{49}\) Ibid.
which... a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored.”

Stuart Hall’s description of culture furthers the definition as “as a process, a set of practices.”

Moreover, Hall might say that the illustrations in Leslie’s are more than just a portrayal of reality but function as a determiner of meaning. When readers view these illustrations they engage in an ongoing process of “constituting and reconstructing meaning.”

What does it mean to use culture as a conceptual frame to study a newspaper? Using culture as a framework to study Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper allows the examination of the paper as a cultural artifact — one that served a community-building purpose. Furthermore, for the purposes of my analysis, the concept culture allows for the study of Leslie’s as a part of New York’s mid-century “popular” culture. Understanding Leslie’s as a cultural artifact does not meet more traditional definitions of culture that fine art or the opera might, for example. Although this dissertation is a study of a mass communication, broadening the definition of Leslie’s as a cultural form allows this work to move beyond mass communication’s disposition with “effects” and “impact studies,” as Journalism historian Carey explains. Not only is Leslie’s examined for its content, the periodical is also recognized as a site where a cultural exchange between members of a social group or society takes place. This approach to media research considered more than just the media content; it also considered the specific socio-historical-cultural context in which it was produced and disseminated.

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50 Williams, Culture, 11-12.
52 Carey, Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society, 41
53 ibid.
In the British tradition, the concept ideology is arguably inseparable from the concept culture. Carey notes that the British tradition “could be described just as easily and perhaps more accurately as ideological studies.” In addition to culture, using ideology as a conceptual framework can help recognize and explain the political nature of Leslie’s “power” as a media institution. If ideology can be broadly defined as a “systematic body of ideas articulated by a particular group of people,” then how can the swill milk crisis as articulated in Leslie’s be identified and examined? It is a way to move away from media as a behavior and more of an ideological apparatus.

The “power” of images relates to the ideological function of the media. Louis Althusser contends that ideology functions through images, language and other cultural formations to make the order of society seem “normal,” and ubiquitous images and icons — such as the flag, for instance, are often taken for granted. Ideological effects can be observed in social practices, media images and in institutions. Ideology can then function within a national setting to help people feel a shared sense of belonging. Hall’s reinterpretation of Althusser’s discussion of ideology informs my theoretical approach. Hall moves away from defining ideology within its traditional Marxist roots. Hall argues that media construct a “reality” that represents certain aspects of social life, making some ideas dominant or more popular over others. Ideology is a “system of

representation” that works at the subconscious level.\textsuperscript{58} Thus, I conceptualize Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper as a part of a system of signification that works to create, maintain and normalize certain ideas and marginalize other ideas.\textsuperscript{59}

This epistemological position — that news texts become meaningful to readers through a process of interpretation and negotiation — posits that one’s interaction with a media “texts” such as Leslie’s illustrated content on the swill milk business helps to shape one’s understanding of the issue. In other words, Frank Leslie’s media texts constructed a certain “reality” for the community regarding swill-fed dairy cows living in the city.\textsuperscript{60} Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman are best known for their work explaining how texts are a social construction, explaining that “all human ‘knowledge’ is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations, the sociology of knowledge must seek to understand the process by which this is done in such a way that a taken-for-granted ‘reality’ congeals for the man [sic] on the street.” Frank Leslie’s swill milk exposé offered readers a certain “reality” about swill milk’s deadly effects on the city’s population. Furthermore, in Making News Gaye Tuchman explains, “knowledge is always socially constructed. It always organizes experience, and it always shapes meaning.”\textsuperscript{61} Tuchman argues that media reportage “helps to constitute [news] as a shared social phenomenon, [and] for the process of describing an event, news defines and shapes

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{58} James Procter, Stuart Hall: Routledge Critical Thinkers (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 44.
\end{footnotesize}
that event.” And in the case of the production and distribution of swill milk in the city of New York, Leslie’s illustrations influenced readers’ perceptions because the average person held little first hand knowledge about. To be clear, this is not an argument that journalism is an all-powerful force: Each of us has the ability to accept, reject or negotiate these media messages.

In this dissertation, I examine and interpret how the content in Leslie’s represented certain ideas and concepts that created meaning for readers. That is, media representations (such as images and text) are used to symbolize something else and act as “stand ins” for what exists in the material world. Hall explains media representations as constituting a “system” of meanings that help organize, arrange and classify ideas in order to establish relationships. Ideology can also function at an unconscious level to make meaning. It can be argued that meaning was authoritatively constructed through Leslie’s illustrated content by introducing readers to a new way of understanding the problem of swill milk as a larger issue concerning the public’s health.

News images and words can be conceptualized as a “system of representation,” that is, a collection of objects, events, people, customs, or other elements that establish connections and relationships. Systems of representation are not limited to individual concepts, but rather organize a network of abstract ideas or concepts to establish,

62 Ibid., 184.
63 Ibid., 2.
characterize and judge relationships. For example, ideas about swill milk communicated in Leslie’s illustrations and text were entwined within larger social and cultural issues to create emotional reactions such as “outrage.” In this context, the emergence of the Leslie’s represented a new cultural production working socially to construct a new reality for its readers about the material conditions that allowed for the practice of swill milk, the government’s role in overseeing the practice, and the public consequences of consuming the product.

This new cultural frame about dairy stables and milk producing practices included establishing, characterizing and judging the profit motives of the milk and alcohol producers. Furthermore, Leslie’s reporting also made corruption allegations on the part of the city. New York City public officials turned a blind eye towards the filthy stables at the expense of the poor, needy immigrants and underserved citizens. Leslies produced a cultural frame about exploitation of the poor and vulnerable by the indifferent elites and corrupt public officials. While concerns are raised about the lives of people living under laissez-faire capitalism in America and the proper role of government as the protector of the vulnerable, it is ultimately conservative in its call for “reform” and not “revolution.” Leslie’s is not the origin of this cultural production but surely represents important developments in its use to achieve political and social change.

It is important to note that ideology studies of media have limitations. Strictly speaking, examining ideology on its own leaves no room for agency on the part of the

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66 Hall distinguishes two different “types” of systems, the first being “mental representations” that we “carry around in our head.” I use his second definition here.
reader. An exclusive focus on ideology constructs renders readers as passive. As Hall reminds us, “Because meaning [is] not given but produced,” he says, “it follows that different kinds of meaning could be ascribed to the same events.”67 While ideology in the press works to make some ideas legitimate while marginalizing others, there is no guarantee that persons will buy into the ideological constructs wholesale. But it is important to understand press as a powerful institution that communicates certain ideas while excluding others. So, perhaps more accurately, Hall’s reinterpretation of ideological power through Antonio Gramsci’s notion of “hegemony” helps.68 Briefly, the theory of hegemony can be characterized as the operation of certain ideologies in a society to *normalize* power, not through the use of force, but by making one viewpoint (or ideology) dominant over another (or others).69 This does not mean that non-dominant viewpoints are rendered absent; rather, hegemony can explain how some ideas that are communicated in the press become “common sense.” Hegemony does function as a “top down” approach, but it is always in flux. It is an area of contestation, and “is won” through “negotiation between competing social, political and ideological forces through which power is contested, shifted or reformed.”70 In addition, the very concept of hegemony allows for unpopular or resistant ideas to emerge and compete for hegemonic power. Therefore, the concept of hegemony can assist in understanding how ideas

68 Procter, *Stuart Hall*, 49.
communicated in these illustrations may have reinforced or destabilized existing social structures regarding the public and health. 71 In this research, a hegemonic struggle is evident in several instances. For example, Leslie’s call for government intervention certainly plays against this era’s sensibility of individualism and self-reliance.

The concepts “representation” and “articulation” are also important concepts concerning media and ideology. Hall explains representation as a system of meaning that helps to organize, arrange and classify ideas in order to establish a relationship among them. 72 He says that meanings are never fixed, and meanings are continually constructed and reconstructed through language. “Language,” for the purposes of this research, is understood as the language of images. Articulation is a way to understand how media messages work in society under certain historical circumstances. In his own words, Hall says, “The theory of articulation asks how an ideology discovers its subject rather than how the subject thinks the necessary and inevitable thoughts which belong to it; it enables us to think how an ideology empowers people, enabling them to begin to make some sense or intelligibility of their historical situation, without reducing those forms of intelligibility to their socio-economic or class location or social position.” 73

The swill milk problem had all of the components for a compelling story, which also lent itself to being sensationalized: political corruption, business fraud and social ills disproportionately affecting immigrant and poor populations. Swill milk was framed as a

menace to public health and was blamed for thousands of deaths, mostly among the youngest and poorest inhabitants of New York City.\textsuperscript{74} The New York press had reported the problem from time to time, beginning at least as early as 1847 when a New York \textit{Tribune} article titled “Mortality in the City.” The piece attributed the alarming number of deaths among children five and under to distillery milk (milk from cows kept in tight quarters and fed only on waste from distilleries) because swill-fed cows “cannot secrete pure milk.”\textsuperscript{75} In addition to periodic news reports, scientific books from at least 1842 had also warned of the dangers to a city’s population of “unnatural methods” of producing milk.\textsuperscript{76} Although city ordinances regulated uses of other livestock, the powerful forces behind the whiskey and milk industries kept any serious regulation of swill milk at bay. Some histories attribute this to corruption on the part of city officials who took bribes from the distillery proprietors.\textsuperscript{77}

The swill milk business continued unregulated for many years, but that would all change in May of 1858 when Frank Leslie began a full-scale investigation. His detailed news illustrations showed everything about swill milk, including detailed drawings showing the condition of the cows to the crowded and filthy stables where they were housed. It did not take long for news of Leslie’s illustrated investigation to spread

\textsuperscript{74} Egan, “Organizing Protest in the Changing City: Swill Milk and Social Activism in New York City, 1842–1864,” 205-26
\textsuperscript{75} “Mortality of the City,” \textit{New York Herald}, July 28, 1847.
\textsuperscript{76} For example, see Robert M. Hartley, \textit{An Historical, Scientific, and Practical Essay on Milk: As an Article of Human Sustenance; with a Consideration of the Effects Consequent Upon the Present Unnatural Methods of Producing It for the Supply of Large Cities} (J. Leavitt, 1842). In 1853 the New York Times called attention to the issue in an article titled “Death in a Jug” that critiqued the poor quality of life in the city.
\textsuperscript{77} Duffy, \textit{A History of Public Health in New York City 1625-1866}. 
throughout the country. These illustrations offered a new narrative about life in the city, and moreover, about the negative consequences of an early version of industrialized dairy production. Frank Leslie and his newspaper’s news images structured and transformed issues like the swill milk problem from a menace affecting few to a food source distributed widely that killed.

**Theorizing How Media Images Make Meaning**

I analyze news images found in *Leslie’s* about swill milk through the lens of social, technological and scientific changes. This idea of photographic “truth” likely played a role in the efficacy of *Leslie’s* illustrations to communicate the harsh treatment of cattle and the corruption of the swill milk trade. *Leslie’s* illustrations are a combination of photographic reproductions, eyewitness sketches and scientific drawings. These visuals often implied “objective” information, providing evidence of something that materially exists in the world.

Like other scholars who study visual images in the public sphere, Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites discuss photography in newspapers and periodicals as a “first draft of history.” They argue that, “By being placed amidst print journalism, the icons also can work in conjunction with other discourses of polity such as speeches, declarations, official reports, judicial appointments and editorial commentary.” Thus, research for this dissertation focuses on the first periodicals that regularly produced

79 Ibid.
illustrations to tell news. These early pioneers of pictorial reporting began what is today taken as a conventional way of conveying news — through use of text and images. If visual images were to supplement printed texts in Frank Leslie’s day, one may say the reverse is true today: printed text is often used to supplement visual images in telling people about their world.

Mass media artifacts, such as newspapers and the illustrations in Leslie’s, are sometimes referred to as a “low” form of culture and rendered unworthy of serious scholarly study. But this study is not concerned with labels that place an arbitrary value some cultural artifacts over others. In fact, cultural artifacts from mass media may be even more worthy of inquiry because “they have so much to teach us about how societies are organized and how societies create meaning,” according to media scholar Nick Lacey. He continues:

The study of culture recognizes these media images as cultural artifacts reflecting a certain time and place, and should be understood that way. They merit study partly due to their popularity and for what they can communicate about how people in the mid-nineteenth century understood and organized the world around them.

Because the primary object of study are illustrations that closely represent reality, it is also important to theorize how scholars discuss the unique qualities of iconographic imagery. Joshua Brown, while not concerned specifically with journalism, explains how illustrations in the nineteenth century pictorial press constitute a social practice. In

80 Lacey, *Image and Representation: Key Concepts in Media Studies*, 84
81 Ibid.
Beyond The Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America, Brown asserts that no histories of the illustrated press explore the illustrations “as evidence of a social practice in its own right.” Brown argues that these illustrations, so often merely used to accompany a historical text to exemplify a particular place and time, need to be studied for their own intrinsic value.

The illustrated reproductions in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper presented news of the swill milk crisis can be interpreted as one “way of seeing” the crisis. John Berger has written that when pictures are reproduced, their meaning becomes “transmittable,” and media images need to be understood at a level deeper than their “face value.” He added that, “an illustration becomes information of a sort, and, like all information, it is either put to use or ignored; information carries no special authority within itself.” And a historical event, the swill milk scandal must be relayed through the discursive practice of storytelling “before it can become a communicative event,” Hall says. Furthermore, unlike textual communication, images are uniquely positioned to communicate objectionable ideas in a way that may be considered too inflammatory to be communicated in words.

82 Brown, Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America, 3.
83 Ibid.
85 Berger, Ways of Seeing, 24.
87 An example from the 1870s makes the point: A Thomas Nast cartoon in 1872 depicted New York Tribune editor and U.S. presidential candidate Horace Greeley stretching his arms over the fence of the Andersonville Prison (depicted as a graveyard with Union soldiers) to “clasp hands” with someone who appears to be in Ku Klux Klan attire. Nast’s illustration suggests that Greeley would stop at nothing to win
It is important to stress that I understand images as polysemic. Images are arguably more “open” to a person’s subjective perspective than the written word; interpretation depends on the subjectivities of the viewer. This does not mean, however, that images have no conceptual boundaries — media images do not work if they fail to draw on shared meanings about which people from a similar culture can agree. Because images draw meaning through analogy and lack explicit meaning, viewers may be less aware of the impact visuals have on how they frame agendas. But multiple interpretations can be applied to a single image, as viewers are left to deduce meaning. The location, size, and accompanying text can enhance or alter the meaning of an image. These elements all provide additional content to consider when interpreting meaning. The meaning of an image alone is often ambiguous. One must study the relationship of various elements — such as illustrations, captions, headlines, advertisements and news copy — and how they work together to produce meaning. For example, a photograph on the front page of the newspaper depicting a young boy holding a U.S. flag in early July may connote a seemingly patriotic young person attending a celebration, like a parade. However, if the accompanying caption reads, “Nephew of Captain Sam Smith Looks on as Funeral Procession Passes,” the viewer now understands that this is a sad occasion.

89 Anderson, The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture, 1790-1860., quoting Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin, 57-58,
Perhaps there is a headline appearing on the same page that could affect meaning even more: “U.S. Death Toll in Iraq Reaches Record Number.” All of these elements together affect the meaning of this image. The meaning changes from an innocent young boy with a flag to the reality of death that accompanies war.  

I emphasize in my research that images have their own aesthetic value and are not merely an accompaniment to the written word. Using methods and theories through a cultural historical lens can reveal otherwise reified news and information to make a new space for understanding how media construct and perpetuate ideas about society. The pictorial content in Leslie’s was a place where ideas about life in New York City were presented, negotiated, and debated on the printed page in relation to the swill milk exposé. Furthermore, there is a relationship between the media and public health that needs to be explored theoretically. Public health initiatives developed more in the United States than in culturally similar European countries. While a causal relationship can hardly be drawn with this narrow of a study, it can offer some insight into how the media of the day framed the public health debate.

Semiotics is a useful way to interrogate images as a cultural product, and scholars use it as both a theory and a method. Ferdinand de Saussure advanced its theoretical development to establish a “science” of language. A linguist, Saussure developed a system to understand how language works to make meaning. Quoting Saussure, Graeme

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Turner explains that semiology “would teach us what signs consist of, what laws govern
them.”92 A “sign” is a basic unit of language, or the smallest unit of communication, such
as a photograph, a word, a sound, and so on.93 The “sign” can be broken down further
into the functions of a “signifier” and a “signified.” The signifier is the word itself and
the signified is the concept of that word.94 For example, a word like “cat” signifies a furry
animal that many keep as pets. The word “cat” is totally arbitrary; there is no “natural”
connection between a word and what it stands for. As a culture, we agree on the meaning
of words we use to describe something, so one could say that the meaning of the word is
socially constructed.95 How can this theory of language be applied to the study of visual
culture? Using Saussure’s discussion of signs as a starting point, other scholars go further
to develop the study of images since visual communication can offer knowledge and
information that only words cannot.

Charles Sanders Peirce expanded semiotic analysis to be more image-specific.96
Pierce’s developed a way to categorize images into three parts: iconic, indexical and
symbolic. For the most part, the illustrations under examination are iconic, meaning, as a
sign, they appear to be a direct representation of reality. Indexical images share a
relationship with what they represent, such as a thermometer is an index of air
temperature. Symbolic images have an arbitrary relationship with what they represent.

An image of a cow in our culture, for example might symbolize nourishment or pastoral

93 Ibid., 15.
living. For an image to reach symbolic status, a culture shares a mutual understanding of what the image means.

Peirce’s image analysis model at the symbolic level is similar to Roland Barthes conception of mythology and images. The French philosopher and linguist asserts that myth is defined by its form and not necessarily by its content.97 Myth can help one recognize when images hold the power to communicate certain ideas while rendering others ideas either marginalized or all together absent.98 To Barthes, myth is an “ideological phenomenon… as the ideological baggage that is attached to signs.” By using Barthes’ method of examining images, one can show and interpret embedded “myths” that can clarify how pictorial content in newspapers, for example, can make certain things or ideas seem natural or universally accepted as fact in a culture.

For Hall, ideological-based studies of media using a semiotic approach “[open] the way for discussion of the cultural function of ideological processes.”99 Because meaning is not natural or inherent in objects, such as media news illustrations, a system of analysis, such as semiotics, can get at the “signifying structures” — that is, the narratives, myths, and broader social and cultural meanings embedded in the images.100 Myth operates on a “second level” of semiological analysis by drawing from denotative and connotative meaning. A denotative and connotative analysis is a process of decoding meaning by pulling back the layers, so to speak. Denotation implies the literal, or direct,
meaning of something. A denotative sign has a meaning that is almost always recognized; that is, meaning-making seems almost natural — like the U.S. flag denoting the United States of America. Connotation, on the other hand, implies meaning, such as an upside down flag (used in a previous example) connoting distress. The connotation of a sign is a much deeper ideological meaning than the denotation and requires close investigation of visual images.\textsuperscript{101} Meaning is dependent on the viewer’s culture. Illustrations do not have meaning outside of the context in which they are produced. Visual images, in particular, contain many latent and manifest meanings. One must study the socio-economic environment in which an image is produced and used to be able to interpret and infer meaning.\textsuperscript{102}

Using a semiological approach to analyzing illustrations works well with an ideological study of media. For example, the meaning of an image is socially constructed, and ultimately, such constructions enable people to “make sense” of the images that they see and of the world in which they live.\textsuperscript{103} Images not only produce meaning (in this case, illustrations that frame swill milk as bad) but also function to maintain meaning and teach us about our world.\textsuperscript{104} As a tool for visual analysis, semiotics, or semiology, “offers a very full box of analytical tools for taking an images apart and tracing how it works in relation to a broader system of meaning.”\textsuperscript{105}

\textsuperscript{101} Hall, \textit{Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practice}, 39.
\textsuperscript{102} Ball et al, 31.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{104} John Fiske, \textit{Introduction to Communication Studies} (Routledge, 1990), 39.
This research recognizes that pictorial content as neither a direct “mirror” of news events or an ideological canvas for those in power to disseminate uncontested information. Using the aforementioned theories to guide my analysis of the experience of swill milk in New York City, I can examine how Leslie’s visual representations likely reproduced and prescribed meaning to contemporary news consumers. Leslie’s swill milk reports illustrated health issues that mostly affected politically disenfranchised groups and revealed competing ideologies related to class, ethnicity, gender, urbanization and government.

**Methods of Analysis for Illustrations**

This work can be distinguished from other histories of the illustrated press through the use of visual analytical methods to study the illustrated material. I make use of an approach influenced by semiology to analyze and interpret images. However, I should stress that I use this method in a fashion that is informed by cultural studies. My work recognizes that meaning is made at three sites: the site of production, the site of image itself and the site of the images’ “audiencing.”

Semiological methods are used to unpack meaning in these newspaper illustrations beyond their “face value,” so to speak. According to Norman Fairclough, semiotic analysis can aid in connecting visual content in the media to “ideologies, power relations and cultural values.”

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106 “Prescribed” can be understood here in terms of “setting an agenda”
107 Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 188.
images in the media contribute to a person’s understanding of his or her identity, and images found in media aid a person in making sense of the world.\textsuperscript{109}

In addition to his theoretical perspectives, I also use Barthes’s interpretive methods that I previously mentioned in the image analysis. His method of interrogation of images helps reveal embedded “myths” that can clarify how Leslie’s images of the swill milk industry presented socially constructed images as natural and factual. The mythological implications of Leslie’s treatment of swill milk reveal something about hegemonic forces at work within society at the time. Using a method that specifically focuses on image analysis can strengthen my interpretation of what these news images were communicating to readers. Perhaps more to the point, this dissertation seeks to understand how Leslie’s illustrated content constructed a news narrative outside of text-only reports in order to better inform an otherwise disenfranchised population about swill milk and its effects of the public’s health.

The following questions guide this research: What news narratives were present in the pictorial content in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper? What was communicated about the “swill milk” industry through the illustrated content? How did these illustrations perform a different kind of journalism through visual storytelling? Can differences be distinguished between the written accounts of swill milk and the illustrated representations? In other words, are the news illustrations communicating ideas that words alone could not, or did not? How might the information communicated in these

\textsuperscript{109} Rose, \textit{Visual Methodologies}, 70.
illustrations have shaped a worldview about the notion of “public health” in mid-nineteenth century New York? What can the newspaper content reveal about the public’s reaction to Leslie’s images?

The time period under study focuses on Leslie’s first pictorial news report that begins in May 1858 and persists through the summer and fall of that year. The illustrations associated with the swill milk scandal are identified and organized in this manner:

- Illustrations are assigned a category or “type” (for example: landscapes, portraits, spot news, sporting, human interest).
- The origin of the illustration: is it a reproduction from a photograph or an original sketch-artist original?
- Placement of the illustration (e.g. front page, interior page).
- Size of the illustration (full page, half page, etc.)
- Is the illustration accompanied by a written account?
- Identity of the artist, if possible.

After each image is categorized, a detailed visual analysis using the semiological methods described above is conducted. The illustrations are first deconstructed by identifying the technical and visual elements — this amounts to taking an inventory of the image. For example, is the illustration a wide-shot of a landscape or a close-up image showing detail of an event? Was it likely drawn in close proximity to the subject? Next,

110 Duffy, 435-436. This was the first of several laws passed that increasingly put restrictions on how milk could be produced for public consumption.

111 By the 1890s recognizable “types” were solidified in printed images, as noted in Gerry Beegan, The Mass Image: A Social History of Photomechanical Reproduction in Victorian London (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). These types distinguish socio-economic classes and occupations, for example, and ultimately expanded newspaper representations.
denotative meaning is identified. In other words, what is the “common sense” or obvious meaning of the image? By combining the technical/visual inventory and the denotative meaning, the next step interprets the illustration’s meaning. What does the image mean, what does it represent, or what does it “stand” for?

Based on what surfaces from my initial analysis, I can perform a more nuanced analysis of image meaning-making and discuss how these images set the agenda for the way in which swill milk was articulated in the press for the public to comprehend. The end goal is to reveal how these illustrations made meaning for readers to interpret at the level of “myth.” Or, in Barthes’s terms, what is the subconscious ideological baggage attached to the image? How might these seemingly straightforward images of swill milk practices work at the level of myth? For example, what myths are communicated about urban vs. rural milk production? Or, how is poverty and immigrant culture portrayed at the level of myth? How might these myths be upheld or challenged in these news illustrations? It is the myths that endure over time and permeate to the wider culture with a link to times past.112

Some material from other newspapers and periodicals is included from this period to help contextualize the illustrated reporting found in Leslie’s. These sources include the New York Herald, the New York (Daily) Times, and The Nation. A secondary research goal of this dissertation is to identify how the public may have responded to Leslie’s swill milk exposé. In an attempt to gauge reception, I track any non-illustrated responses to the

112 Hall, Representation, 39.
swill milk exposé, such as published letters, advertisements and written by citizens in
response to the illustrations that were published in the newspapers. I also include any
editorial cartoons that respond to Leslie’s exposé as well.

The interpretive methods I use understand my sources as a contemporary viewer
may have understood them, yet my methodological inquiry also recognizes that I am
clearly bound to my own place and time in history. My time and place in history
obviously influences my work. As a historian during the height of the Cold War might
have been shaped by his or her circumstances under the capitalist/communist dichotomy,
I assume that I am influenced by the circumstances of what is often referred to as the
“post-9/11” world. This research draws from interdisciplinary concepts in cultural and
media studies, history, journalism, and visual studies. This is a historical approach to the
role of the press in communicating meaning to readers and promoting a certain “reality”
about civic life in a representative democracy that is economically organized under
capitalism. Certain concepts, such as freedom of expression, self-reliance and earning
potential, for example, are valued. My approach is attentive to the cultural specifics of
Antebellum America. I understand images and text as decipherable, or “knowable,” in the
sense that there are theories and methods that allow for the interpretation of their meaning
(as opposed to being completely lost to history). I consider the ways in which images and
text not only work together to make meaning but also how meaning(s) made are situated
in a specific place and time. As a cultural study of journalism history, my examination
encompasses the media texts, audience responses, and the production process and structures that shaped the mid-nineteenth century media environment and U.S. culture.

**Manuscript Organization**

This dissertation is organized in seven chapters, including this introductory chapter. Chapter two provides Leslie’s in the context of life in mid-century New York City. Examples from newspaper and magazine texts help connect and contextualize my later discussion on Frank Leslie’s exposé on the swill milk crisis. I provide a sense of the political climate, burgeoning reform movements and the rise of industrialization, then describe the increasing immigrant population that bring about social change in New York City’s urban landscape. Chapter two also includes a review of changing scientific knowledge and how that understanding shifted perceptions of disease and sickness. Chapter three focuses on the era’s changing journalism practices and summarizes scholarship about the social, historical and technological context of the nineteenth century press and illustrated newspapers in the United States. This chapter also describes mid-nineteenth century visual culture that helped engender the development of the visual reporting as well as the business of the newspaper. A full-scale examination of the pictorial reporting about swill milk and the public reaction to Leslie’s exposé follows in chapters four, five and six. Chapter four responds to my research questions about the illustrations in Leslie’s and offers interpretations about how the illustrated content made meaning for readers in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper and constructed the swill milk problem in New York City as a public health issue. In chapter five I analyze
editorials, advertising and public documents as my evidence to put forth an interpretation on the public’s reaction to the swill milk scandal, and chapter six covers the media attention paid to the city investigation of the swill milk business. The final chapter reflects on my investigation and suggests future avenues of research.

**Conclusion**

Many credit Leslie’s swill milk reports for finally forcing enough pressure on New York City officials to launch an investigation that influenced later legislation by the state of New York to implement milk production standards.\(^{113}\) While Leslie and his staff of “reporter-artists” did not bring down the business of swill milk singlehandedly, they started a public conversation and sparked an awareness relating to public health matters by communicating news through pictorial reporting. Saying in his first issue on swill milk that, “The public, which had remained unmoved at the eloquent phillippise\(^ {114}\) of the *Sunday Dispatch*, eight years ago, was startled by the appeals made to their eyesight,” Leslie insinuates that the use of news pictures was instrumental in capturing the public’s attention — something that words alone were unable to do.\(^ {115}\)

By choosing the urban milk industry as his subject of investigation, Leslie would capture a large audience, partly because milk as a food source was widespread in the city.


\(^{114}\) Leslie’s August 21, 1858. The word “phillippise” is the context is confusing. The OED defines the meaning as, “writing to speak or write as one who has been wrongly or corruptly inspired or influenced.”

and commonly upheld as a “perfect food.” Some newspaper editors and medical professionals had discussed the danger associated with swill-fed cow’s milk years earlier, and Leslie used that history to his advantage to capture public attention with his pictorial exposé. Furthermore, the narrative that milk can be deadly endured. Long after Leslie’s crusade against the industry, the authors of the 1929 book, *The Most Nearly Perfect Food: The Story of Milk*, discuss the value of “pure” milk and the continued concerns regarding milk as the cause of disease:

> It is a strange thing that nature’s most valuable food may at times also be one of the most dangerous. We have long known that milk may become a medium by which serious infection diseases may be spread… When milk is pure, that is, clean and safe, it is indeed the most nearly perfect food, but dirty and contaminated milk is certainly not in that category. The sanitary production of milk is an absolute necessity, not only to enhance its food value, but also for the general protection of the public health.¹¹⁶

Frank Leslie’s publishing career straddles a crucial period in the development of the modern newspaper in the nineteenth century. In the United States, newspapers tied to political parties were waning, and in their place, a commercially driven press multiplied, with a goal to appeal to a mass audience. Publishers focused on profits through circulation and, later, advertising revenue. Similar to the explosion of information on the World Wide Web, the circulation of newspapers steadily increased. Dailies, weeklies, Sunday papers and specialty papers grew in number over the span on the nineteenth

In many ways, the explosion of print culture altered life in the city, as it had been known. For this dissertation, I want to focus on one aspect of that mid-century contemporary print culture: the introduction of timely news images as journalism in the illustrated press. Historians and mass communication scholars alike have neglected the study of images for their own sake. As scholarly inquiry, pictures are commonly considered subordinate to the written word, less sophisticated or manipulative, and often assumed to require less intellectual engagement. Meaning is assumed to be so apparent that iconographic images such as those in Leslie’s need no further investigation. On the contrary, I believe that news images, if carefully examined for their storytelling power, make meaning in a way that words alone cannot. To borrow from visual scholar Paul Messaris, I ask a similar question that he poses in his book Visual Persuasion: “What are the fundamental characteristics that distinguish visual images from other modes of communication?” I undertake this research understanding that the illustrations in Leslie’s have the capacity to construct new and distinctive meanings about life in Antebellum New York City.

Historian Joshua Brown says that scholars studying this period have neglected the illustrated press as a social practice in its own right, treating it simply as “a prelude to the revolutionary ‘half-tone effect’” the process that made it possible to reproduce

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photographs in newspapers. My work contributes to the ongoing recovery of the history of visual journalism. The swill milk pictorial exposé in Leslie’s is an early example of pictorial as new narrative style in the news. The news illustrations influenced news content and newspaper sales, marking another transition of the newspaper industry from a primarily text-driven medium to one that regularly uses images to report the day’s events. But while scholars generally acknowledge the influence of Leslie’s pictorial exposé that eventually led to sanitary reforms that outlawed the production of swill milk, the role of the illustrated press has not yet been the subject of a full-scale inquiry by historians, public health researchers or journalism and mass communication scholars.

Thomas Connery observes in his book on realism and journalism that illustrated papers were “unique to their time and played a significant role in ushering in new expectations for experiencing events, people, and life being lived through popular publications.” Frank Leslie positioned himself to produce timely news images like no one before him and influenced how other publications would report the news. This research focuses on one of the many controversial stories that Leslie would tackle during his career. Through his use of timely news illustrations, Leslie successfully inflated “swill milk” as a significant public health issue, convincing many that the drink was poisonous and brought death to many in the city. It would also be a story that would sell a lot of newspapers.

The science that would better explain how milk from cows could harm people — germ theory — would not fully develop until after the Civil War. However, this dissertation is concerned with Leslie’s portrayal of the public health crisis and how he shaped the way people understood “swill milk” through news images. In the following pages, I seek to show how the illustrations in New York’s Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper provided a new narrative for New Yorkers to understand their world. And while scholars have shown that the use of visual images brought about new ways of organizing, observing, reproducing, and transmitting news and information, I offer new interpretations on the swill milk scandal in terms of both what was communicated visually, how those illustrations were received by the public, and how the conversation contributed to a developing discourse about public health.122

The historian studies the past to better understand the present. In the words of cultural historian Warren I. Susman, “the historian knowingly or not… [is] seeking to understand his own cultural situation and himself.”123 Today, a world without news images is literally unimaginable. Yet, in the long span of human history, visual reporting is a relatively recent development. Although little can be known about the attitudes of people towards illustrations in the 19th century, scholarship does reveal that these illustrated periodicals that presented a new way of reporting the news were very popular.

These early forms of communicating news through visual conventions shaped the

122 John Tagg in The Burdon of Representation: Essays of Photography and Histories includes a series of essays about the rise of the photographic image in the nineteenth century, which is instructive to this dissertation concerned with illustrations as news in the pictorial press.
123 Warren I. Susman, Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century, (Smithsonian Books), xiii.
development of visual journalism, which today is essential to anyone’s understanding of the world.
Chapter Two: Life in Antebellum New York City

Introduction

Many historians have written about the massive social changes in New York City during the mid-nineteenth century. European immigration to New York is well documented, as is the movement of rural native-born citizens into urban centers for employment opportunities. The advent of the steam engine and other means of mechanizing work shifted production away from “cottage” artisans to the factory. The emergence of industrialized society helped spur mass communication through widely distributed newspapers and other publications. Education opportunities for the emerging middle class also increased, raising literacy rates. Property owning requirements for voting were abolished in the 1820s, transforming the political system at (least in terms of white male suffrage). Historian Eric Foner has remarked that the average citizen of this period was more politically active compared with today’s citizen, and this was reflected

in high voting and political participation patterns. But all of this apparent progress was mainly limited to elites and a rising middle-class. The consequences of social change included a variety of social ills, such as a lack of adequate housing, poor sanitation and waves of epidemic disease.

This period in U.S. history cannot be described as anything less than transformational. Marshall Berman paints a succinct picture of nineteenth-century change in this passage from *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*:

> This is a landscape of steam engines, automatic factories, railroads, vast new industrial zones; of teeming cities that have grown overnight, often with dreadful human consequences; of daily newspapers, telegraphs, telephones and other mass media, communicating on an ever wider scale; of increasingly strong national states and multinational aggregations of capital; of mass social movements fighting these modernizations from above with their own modes of modernization from below; of an ever expanding world market embracing all, capable of the most spectacular growth, capable of appalling waste and devastation, capable of everything except solidity and stability.\(^{127}\)

*Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, which came into existence during this time, is one of the hallmarks of that transformation. *Leslie’s* pictorial reporting on the “swill milk” issue, of course, is one example of the “dreadful human consequences” to which Berman refers. Placing *Leslie’s* swill milk pictorial exposé in this context, we understand


it as both a reaction to, and a part of the social, economic and political fabric of the changing city. Leslie’s charges of political shenanigans and animal abuses supported his more serious allegations that swill milk killed thousands of people every year, often children. Leslie’s functioned to shape the public’s understanding of social change by drawing attention to the issues facing the city through powerfully crafted visual reporting, the first of its kind in America.

The purpose of this chapter is to frame the swill milk exposé in Frank Leslie’s weekly publication, *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, in its larger context. This framework will help explain how and why a system of swill milk production existed for as long as it did — and why Leslie’s pictorial reporting struck such a resonant chord with the public. This chapter will outline the physical transition of nineteenth century New York City from an informal city to a rapidly expanding industrial center, with the scale and pace of expansion previously unseen in this country. From 1820 to 1860, it is estimated that the city’s population grew 524 percent.\(^{128}\) Many of the new inhabitants were immigrants fleeing political oppression and economic hardship while others relocated from rural areas. Both groups would face many challenges in their new city. While New York transformed into an industrial driving force in the U.S., the less affluent would suffer the greatest consequences of a city ill prepared for the expansion needed to accommodate them. For some, the reality of massive population growth resulted in filthy and crowded living conditions. Little suggests that local and state politicians were

\(^{128}\) Homberger, *The Historical Atlas of New York City*, 70. The population in 1820 was 126,706 and rose to 813,669 by 1860. 25 percent of the number of inhabitants by 1860 is said to be Irish immigrants.
prepared for these sweeping changes to life in the city or had a long-term plan to accommodate such rapid change. That included attention to public health issues.\textsuperscript{129}

The technological and economic changes that accompanied industrialization also affected news and printing trade. As Joshua Brown explains, by the 1850s, “The balance shifted from a localized, undercapitalized printing industry to centralized manufacturing by large publishers located in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston for a national audience.”\textsuperscript{130} In addition, the spread of the telegraph connected cities across the nation, and by the summer of 1858, the first successful laying of the transatlantic telegraph was accomplished. As a result, communication was progressively more independent of place. Lower paper costs and cheaper mailing rates, coupled with technological improvements in printing press technology and transportation, increased the dissemination of news as well.\textsuperscript{131} While Alan Trachtenberg is describing post-Civil War America in this passage, the transformative effect of one’s experience with mediated communication is already happening in Frank Leslie’s 1850s New York: “In technologies of communication, vicarious experience began to erode direct physical experience in the world. Viewing and looking at representations, words and images, city people found themselves addressed more often as passive spectators that as active participants.”\textsuperscript{132} Frank Leslie seized an opportunity to join the proliferation of news and information in the growing city, and he

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\textsuperscript{130} Brown, Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America, 23.
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{132} Alan Trachtenberg, The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 122.
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differentiated his news with pictures. Leslie’s illustrated reporting cut to the heart of city corruption and social inequities, presenting readers with an alternative way of thinking about how and what government should do to help its citizens, in terms of preserving and elevating their wellbeing.

Leslie’s images were influential in the development of visual journalism and served as an agent to spur social change. Images are easier to access and understand than the printed word, and because of their apparent transparency, Leslie’s pictorial accounts of corruption quickly communicated the story to readers. These detailed and provocative news images undoubtedly captured a large audience to include those who otherwise did not read. As a result, Leslie’s pictorial reporting sought to raise political awareness among groups of citizens who were otherwise ignored or marginalized in society and the mainstream press itself.

The “Factory as Republican Community”

By the 1850s, New York City had grown into a world leader in manufacturing, thanks in part to commercial trading and the strength of the gold market. Growing financial markets and the mechanization of production transformed a variety of goods and services. The talents of native-born citizens and immigrants alike transformed the city into the country’s biggest industrialized metropolis by mid century. By the turn of the nineteenth century, New York was the nation’s largest city. The construction of the

Erie Canal earlier in the century and the continuously expanding railroad made New York the nation’s manufacturing and industrial hub.\textsuperscript{134}

Alongside the many social changes happening during this period in history, industrialization was setting in motion a growing working- and middle-class population.\textsuperscript{135} The master and apprentice system of production that had been the tradition for so long, including in the newspaper industry, was being eclipsed by mechanization that allowed for the mass production of some goods and services. On the eve of the Civil War, there were more than 4300 factories in the city that employed roughly 90,000 workers, approximately two-thirds of New York’s workforce. Staff per factory ranged from 25 on the smaller to hundreds in the larger shops. Although steam was transforming manufacturing, human brawn was still a major energy source. “Powered firms were roughly three times more expensive to established as unpowered ones, so by 1860 only 18 percent of New York’s shops were engine driven.”\textsuperscript{136} Many of the men who emigrated from Europe had planned to reestablish their artisan positions but now found themselves working in these factories, often for low wages. Women, many of whom were working in the textile trade, found their wages even lower: “A woman’s wages reflected the assumption that she didn’t need to support herself but was merely supplementing the

\textsuperscript{134} The Eric Canal opened in 1825 and was transformative to the city of New York. See Gotham and Homberger, The Historical Atlas of New York City: A Visual Celebration of Nearly 400 Years of New York City’s History, 76-77.
income of her husband.\textsuperscript{137} The economic circumstances for working men and women, then, kept many in poverty. For garment workers, Issac Merritt Singer’s arrival and establishment of his sewing machine factory in 1850 worsened their chances at upward mobility as well.\textsuperscript{138} Industrialization thus weakened opportunities for individual artisans and craftsmen and craftswomen, forever shifting the relationship between producer and product and contributing to considerable social and economic changes that occurred in cities like New York throughout the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{139}

The industrial revolution in New York City that contributed to its population boom resulted in too many people confined to too little space. The unpleasant consequences of overcrowding and pollution was complicated by a sanitary infrastructure that was unable to keep pace with progress. The lack of adequate housing and proper sanitation mostly negatively affected the poor and immigrant populations and compromised health and living conditions in the city.\textsuperscript{140} City services such as waste disposal and garbage collection teetered in dysfunction with the onslaught of population growth, and any significant forethought given to “infrastructure” development to meet the challenge of urban population growth was nascent at best.\textsuperscript{141}

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid. 665.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid. Singer is recognized as a pioneer in manufacturing. Outside of ammunition and military facilities, Singer perfected mass production techniques to allow for precision-made parts to allow for easy repair and replacement.
Providing clean drinking water to city residents was a continual challenge. Sanitary engineering began in earnest during the 1830s, but city officials, namely the Common Council (part of New York City’s complicated and somewhat dispersed municipality), hedged on recommendations from city and fire officials to take charge of the city’s water supply. The Common Council presumably felt enough public pressure by 1832 to push ahead to secure funding to build reservoirs, mainly to supply water for firefighting purposes. Two years later, city water commissioners recommended detailed plans for an aqueduct and water system and put it to a public vote. Public health historian John Duffy notes, “Ironically, the three wards which voted against the proposal included many of the poorest people, precisely those who stood most to gain from an adequate water supply,” one of many factors stalling infrastructure improvements in the city.142

In 1837, the city began building a water system to bring in water from the Croton River from the North in Westchester County to meet part of the city’s needs. By the 1840s, more affluent homes would have indoor plumbing. Public bathing facilities provided accommodations for the rest of New Yorkers for three cents a visit.143 But clean water and adequate sewer systems would continue to be a problem for many more years. The privately held Manhattan Company controlled much of the city’s water in the early nineteenth century, and, not surprisingly, they kept their business interests ahead of public service. In the ten-year period between 1840 and 1850, the city’s population

142 Duffy, A History of Public Health in New York City, 396.
increased by nearly 65 percent, so it is fair to speculate that the infrastructure to bring clean water to the city grew increasingly inadequate.\(^{144}\)

The poorest areas of the city likely never had a clean water supply in the first place. The “foul and polluting industries near wells and residential areas” described by one historian likely included the runoff from animal waste produced in the swill milk stables and undoubtedly contaminated their water.\(^{145}\) To cope with the poor water supply, some of the poor added alcohol to water to improve the taste (a remedy that could not prevent water-borne illness, of course).\(^{146}\) The plight of these residents would later be the subject of Leslie’s reporting that linked death and disease to the consumption of swill milk. Because swill milk producers allegedly used water to dilute the milk they sold, it is no wonder many of them fell ill (as we now know that contaminated water likely caused some outbreaks of epidemic disease in the city).

Fire in the city was another factor that influenced the construction of an adequate water supply to the city. A major fire in 1835 that raged through today’s lower Manhattan had lasting effects in the city, changing the demographic footprint of the island. The Financial District was destroyed and real estate prices soared, widening the gap between the rich and the poor. The more affluent residents moved uptown and closed in on the pastureland where dairy cows were raised, leaving behind the more crowded streets and

\(^{144}\) According to a New York City Department of City Planning document, the increase was 202,837 in 1840 and increase to 312,710 by 1850. http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/census/1790_2000_hist_data.shtml. accessed January 29, 2009.
\(^{146}\) Ibid, 82-83.
dirty industries overtaking lower Manhattan.\textsuperscript{147} Vast changes continued through the 1830s and 1840s, as places familiar to New Yorkers disappeared and new buildings quickly took their place. Many buildings were relocated while others were demolished to make room for new structures. Significant landmarks to many long-time residents, such as the Brick Church on Beckman Street, were sold and moved. Other landmarks, like the Tontine Building in 1855, where early Wall Street traders met, were razed to make room for new construction.\textsuperscript{148} To the average New Yorker at the time, the pace of change surely left many uneasy about what was happening to their once small and manageable city.

As the city continued to grow, fire was only one of the factors that reshaped the city’s architectural landscape. By the time of Leslie’s swill milk reports, demand for choice real estate in the heart of the city pushed more modest accommodations to the margins and reshaped the city’s architectural landscape. The Sober Federal Houses that served New York’s more vulnerable citizens were removed from high-value real estate areas to make way for mansions, upscale retail shops, hotels and other places for the rich in the city.\textsuperscript{149} But, as many historians of New York note, the city was a series of contradictions. The Five Points area, labeled one of the worst slums in the world at the time, was not far from the fashionable markets and shops where the rich spent their money. Living accommodations in Five Points were built hastily to meet the needs of the

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\textsuperscript{147} Ibid., 78-79
\textsuperscript{149} Homberger, \textit{The Historical Atlas of New York City: A Visual Celebration of Nearly 400 Years of New York City's History}, 75.
\end{flushright}
rapidly expanding population of new residents. Tenant houses, later called tenements, were built to solve the housing shortage. But many of the dwellings designed to be single-family homes ended up housing multiple families. Most homes were infested with rodents and lice, and proper sewers did not serve this area of the city.150

Clearly, the poor had bigger problems and did not have the political power to demand a better milk supplier, and the distillery stables that Leslie exposed would be a big supplier of their milk. Their crowded and filthy living conditions accompanied the day-to-day threat of theft and robbery. Prostitution and drunkenness were common in the poorer areas of town. The problems endured by the poor were in large part a byproduct of the city’s growth outpacing its ability to keep up with basic municipal services such as adequate housing and clean water. New York’s most vulnerable citizens were caught up in political battles that questioned who should be responsible for the plight of the poor: local municipalities, private enterprise or benevolent resources.

“New Yorkers were of two minds whether to celebrate the heroic pace and scale of change, or to join the city’s cultural leaders in their tone of denunciation and lament,” says the author of The Historical Atlas of New York City, Eric Homberger. The city was perceived as becoming more dangerous, not only from crime, but also from dangers of unhealthy living conditions. Because of the scale and pace of the changing infrastructure and the colossal manufacturing development, many long-time residents were failing to recognize the city that they had called home. Another change that would worry the

150 Ibid, 111.
Anglo-American residents was the seemingly endless stream of immigrants entering the city looking for work and a new place to call home. And many of these new inhabitants did not look, behave or practice religion like they did.

**Immigration Transforms the City**

Swill milk stables, despite their notorious status, helped meet the demands for milk for an immigrant population on the rise. One source says that the city’s population grew nearly 65 percent from 1840 and 1850, with German and Irish immigrants dominating the immigrant make-up of New York at this time.\(^{151}\) Most Irish immigrants were poor and destitute, fleeing economic collapse, a tyrannical government, and the potato blight that had depleted their main source of food. More than a million and a half Irish would die in Ireland in the 1840s, and for those who survived, one option was to go into exile in America. Many Irish piled onto “coffin ships” run by unscrupulous ship workers looking to profit from Irish misfortune.\(^{152}\) German immigrants were a little better off, with many German emigrating as political refugees after their country’s military squelched attempts to democratize the government.\(^{153}\) While Germans and Irish shared the experience of immigration to a new country, their similarities for the most part end there. A greater number of Germans became middle-class merchants or had the means to move away from the city. Irish immigrants, conversely, were impoverished and unskilled, 


\(^{153}\) Ibid, 116.
filling the city’s poorest sections. Twenty-five percent of New Yorkers were Irish immigrants at the time of *Leslie*’s swill milk exposé. And it was the Irish who worked in the urban dairy stables and delivered the swill milk produced in the city.

Irish emigrating from their home county also settled in South Boston and parts of Canada, but the largest number moved into the Sixth District in New York. Also called Five Points, this district was a mix of immigrants, including Christian and Jewish German, Italians and African Americans, but was dominated by Irish by the time the swill milk scandal broke in *Leslie*’s. Irish immigrants failed to assimilate like other groups and struggled for acceptance as authentic citizens. Irish identity was tied to Catholicism, and the largely Protestant culture viewed their Catholic faith as antithetical to democracy. A Catholic could not be a good American while also professing allegiance to Rome and the Pope. As a population, Irish were distrustful of government and the ruling classes. And because they had been oppressed as a people for so long, politicians — many from their own ethnic background — took advantage of their desperate situation and inexperience with the democratic process. Opportunistic politicians bought votes with promises of food, jobs and legal help. One can hardly blame them for exchanging a seemingly meaningless vote for security in a new land. As a result, this created a block of voters that became culturally bound to certain politicians and political groups.

African Americans had even more problems for some obvious reasons. Incoming European immigrants were gradually taking over their neighborhoods and their customary employment, such as jobs on the waterfront and masonry work. In 1851 the *African Repository* told its readers, “The influx of white laborers has expelled the Negro almost en masse from the exercise of the ordinary branches of labor.”\(^{157}\) Irish workers in most cases replaced the black workforce and would also take their place as the largest ethnic group in Five Points. Thanks to the arrival of these Europeans, the black population that had held tight, neighborhood communities, was slowly being scattered throughout the island and into the city of Brooklyn.\(^{158}\)

In the 1850s, the New York political scene experienced what historian Eric Foner calls a “Nativist outbreak” that further separated Protestant-natives from the immigrant population and other non-whites in New York. Illustrative of an increasingly heterogeneous society, disagreement was reflected in voting patterns. Natives tended to vote for Whig-Republicans, and Irish Catholics were more likely to vote Democratic.\(^{159}\) The ideology of these parties cannot be described in sufficient detail here, but suffice it to say that the Democratic party worked from a platform that recognized and wanted to assimilate significant class differences between the rich and the poor, or between capitalist owners and the workforce. Their stance reflected a suspicion of government policies that facilitated business interests. The Whigs, conversely, did not recognize a

\(^{157}\) Quoted in *Gotham*, 854.

\(^{158}\) Ibid.

significant political chasm between merchants and laborers. In other words, the interest of
the businessman and the worker were more or less the same.\textsuperscript{160} But these are idealized
political positions. The Democrats exercised political power at this time through the
Tammany machine that was run by crooked city bureaucrats, so while many may have
paid lip service to uplifting the poor, any real help to the poor was stymied by corruption.

For Frank Leslie, the urban swill milk stables must have seemed like one of many
problems city officials ignored or pretended to correct. Meeting the milk demands for the
massive immigrant population made swill milk a viable business, and these stables were
side effects of overpopulation like the dysfunctional sewage systems and city garbage
collection. Political corruption stifled some development of urban infrastructure away
from poorer areas such as the Five Points neighborhood, so the major problems were
somewhat contained to poor areas of the city and out of sight of the more affluent
population.\textsuperscript{161} The laissez-faire political sentiment was an ideological roadblock that
prevented serious government intervention to address the social issues facing the urban
poor and underserved population of the city. Many recognized the city was in crisis, and
if the government wasn’t going to take any serious action, forces outside of the city
would have to step in. “The disintegration of an older patriarchal, hierarchical social
order contributed to a deep sense of anxiety — that democracy would degenerate into
anarchy, that self-seeking individualism would erode traditional morality, that

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid, 18–19.
\textsuperscript{161} Tyler Anbinder, \textit{Five Points: The 19th-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance,
Stole Elections, and Became the World’s Most Notorious Slum},
commercialism would undermine national ideals” writes Steven Mintz in *Moralists and Moralizers: America’s Pre-Civil War Reformers*.\(^{162}\) A variety of reform movements in the nineteenth century grew out of a concern that society was out of control. By promoting new codes of behavior, reformers sought to alleviate social anxiety, help the poor and aid those they felt were “morally bankrupt.” Some reformers acted on religious benevolence and others were inspired by republicanism that valued civic duty and lively participation in the public sphere to spread middle-class culture.\(^{163}\) Some individuals and groups pushed for reform by advocating for temperance ordinances, while others had less “righteous” intensions such as nativists bend on suppressing foreign influences that they viewed as a direct threat to their value system — in other words, what infringed on the Protestant version of a good American. I would count the efforts of Frank Leslie and his reporting team as analogous to reformers, but only to a point. His illustrated weekly, after all, was a for-profit newspaper. Picturing provocative and shocking content was profitable and captured new, middle-class consumers.

**Culture of Reform**

The research on nineteenth century reformers characterizes them as everything from naïve and idealistic to do-gooders who were religious zealots bent on social control.\(^{164}\) No matter how reformers are remembered, their efforts have had a lasting impact. The establishment of the public school system, hospitals, prisons (and the ethical


\(^{164}\) Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers*, xiii
treatment of prisoners), livable housing and sanitation improvements are all rooted in nineteenth-century reform efforts. One might say that social change in the mid-nineteenth century New York constituted a complex web of competing ideologies about what constitutes being a how best to be an American. On one hand, reform Protestantism is a virtue, but the Evangelical preachers also supposed that personal economic prosperity is indicative of God’s blessing. Laissez-faire politics and the culture of reform, then, have similar proclivities, and in many ways, reinforce each other.

With roots in early nineteenth century religious revival, Evangelicalism’s dominance led to setting standards for the middle class on behavior norms and promoted “the Protestant ethic, [equating] piety and Christian morality with sobriety, thrift, industry and individual self-discipline.” Evangelicals spread the idea that pain comes with progress, but it can be reconciled through piety. “They [Evangelicals preachers] imagined a society that blessed work and material progress while mitigating its abuses through faith-based reform, charity and virtuous family life.”

One scholar of the antebellum reform movement says that reformers in the United States reflect the ideology of American liberalism. This brand of reform was to “broaden individual rights, foster the fulfillment or the salvation of the individual, and eradicate those institutions and customs that obstructed individual self-determination and improvement” while balancing these efforts with industrial and technological progress.

165 Mintz, Moralists and Modernizers, 28-29.
166 McDougall, Throes of Democracy: The American Civil War Era, 1829-1877, 139.
167 Mintz, Moralists and Modernizers, 155.
However, it seems that reform efforts could also reflect republican values through the efforts of some working within the government to instigate change and reform. These extremes may represent the ideological tussle between city officials who were still trying to run New York like a small town vs. those who understood that the city was out of control and needed significant structural changes in order to serve all citizens well. For example, New York City Inspector Dr. John H. Griscom urged for large-scale changes to housing regulation and the city’s infrastructure, and would later become one of Frank Leslie’s biggest supporters in his campaign to rid the city of swill milk.

All of this brings into question the role of city leadership and how it should function on behalf of citizens, especially the most vulnerable ones. For reformers, be they from the literary crowd or via the Evangelical preachers of the day, the end goal was aimed at the perfection of society. But this perfection would not be accomplished through authoritarian government policy. Long-held values based in Protestantism included self-sufficiency and hard work as a Christian duty that manifest itself through capitalist labor.¹⁶⁸ The complexity of reform tied to religion in America was the ethos of the free market. You were the commander of your own soul: “Americans took it to be republican common sense that self-government depended on citizens willing to choose virtue over vice, public-spiritedness over selfish corruption, and the future over the past.”¹⁶⁹

Less than a year before Leslie’s swill milk exposé, the city would suffer an economic collapse brought about by bad and illegal business practices that prompted a drop in the stock market. The fraudulent practices of The Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company, one culprit, were uncovered when European demand for American produce dropped and had a ripple effect through the economy, affecting the farming, shipping and railroad industries. Remembered as “The Panic of 1857,” banks stopped lending at a time when the business community needed financial support the most.\textsuperscript{170} Not surprisingly, unemployment followed. An estimated 20% of men and 50% women were unemployed, mostly from working-class labor. Homelessness increased, as landlords evicted those out who could not pay their rent; tenement housing grew even more crowded and burdened the infrastructure of the city further.\textsuperscript{171} It seems reasonable to speculate that widespread financial collapse disproportionately affects the poor, straining any programs or benevolent organizations dedicated to the reform of underprivileged populations.

\textit{The Rise of Scientific Thought and the Story of Swill Milk}

The abusive overcrowding of the swill milk stables could be a metaphor for the city of New York in the 1850s. There were too many people occupying too little space, raising a host of unique problems not found in country living: a lack of clean drinking water and no clear place to safely dispose of refuse. City living, where people lived in close proximity to one another, also enabled the spread of disease. With such overwhelming growth, many basic human resources needed to sustain life were strained,

\textsuperscript{170} Burrows and Wallace, \textit{Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898}, 842-843.
\textsuperscript{171} Duffy, \textit{A History of Public Health in New York City}. 

68
scarce or unavailable. There was no consistent city infrastructure to accommodate the rapid increase in the city’s population. Modern concepts of social responsibility about unadulterated food, health care and other human services to all citizens did not exist. This lack of basic care that we take for granted today especially affected the poor and immigrant populations during this period in American history.¹⁷² The notion that the government would, or should, provide services to maintain or improve the general “public health” was early in its conception.

English-born New Yorker, Robert M. Hartley, likely influenced the way New York residents, and Frank Leslie, thought about the poor and the swill milk issue. Raised in the “Second Awakening” culture of upstate New York, Hartley was “called” to pursue social reform in New York City as a young man. Erna Melanie DuPuis, the author of *Nature's Perfect Food: How Milk Became America's Drink*, calls Hartley, “America’s first major pure milk agitator and probably the country’s first public consumer advocate.”¹⁷³ It was Hartley’s reform efforts through the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP) and his writing about the dairy industry would also serve as a map for Leslie’s investigation.¹⁷⁴ Hartley’s approach was scientifically oriented, and he was not in favor of unstructured charity. Those in need had to earn it through improving themselves, presumably through piety, temperance, and Protestantism. Like many of his

¹⁷⁴ Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*, 620; 848-849
contemporaries, Hartley felt that “poverty bespoke depravity.”

Irish Catholics, among the poorest in the city, did not meet Hartley’s definition of charitable worthiness. Irish residents would be among those who would consume swill milk, and unlike their wealthier neighbors, they could not afford to buy higher-quality milk produced under better conditions. Along with the New York Post, Hartley authored a study about the pitfalls of distilleries and was one of the first to write about the swill-fed cows.

Published in 1842, Hartley’s *An Historical, Scientific and Practical Essay on Milk as an Article of Human Sustenance*, outlined the business model of recycling alcohol distillery slop for the cows. His first concern was the abuse of alcohol, but he also wanted to stop the swill milk trade. Even so, he failed to recognize that the poor had little choice but to purchase the cheaper, inferior milk.

Roughly a decade after Hartley’s writing on swill milk, John Mullaly published a pamphlet about the dangers of swill milk, but Mullaly cited science — as opposed to religious doctrine — in his call to rid the city of swill milk. For a twenty-five cent, anyone could read about the dangers of swill milk in Mullaly’s *The Milk Trade in New York and Vicinity*. The New York Tribune published a review of the book in January 1853, saying that Mullaly had “done our City and Suburbs a single service in condensing… the statistics of the Milk Trade of our City.”

175 Ibid., 620.
177 Eagan, “Natural Protest,” 212.
178 "Milk in Cities."
It is possible that the audience most affected by swill milk could not afford to purchase, or able to read and comprehend, Hartley’s and Mullaly’s work. Therefore, while some of the city’s poor and immigrant groups remained unaware, or even skeptical, middle-class temperance reformers denounced the practice of re-purposing distillery slop, citing the distinct smell of alcohol from milk produced by distillery-fed cows.\textsuperscript{179} Empathy for the poor and immigrant classes was complicated partly by attitudes that viewed epidemic disease such as cholera as God’s way of punishing sinners. Since the majority of victims tended to be poor, Irish and Catholic, that explanation aligned with the worldview of the dominant Protestant population.\textsuperscript{180} The upper classes generally viewed the poor as lazy and unworthy of charity; the poor were more likely to become sick or suffer from disease because they were uneducated or immoral.\textsuperscript{181} Victorian attitudes toward women and children also constitute part of this story. Poor mothers were considered unfit to breastfeed, hence the need to feed cow’s milk to their children. Likewise, middle-class women were often considered emotional and weak, thereby unable to supply sufficient nutrients to their children through their own breast milk. In addition, Hartley’s work stressed the importance of pure, country milk while altogether ignoring social and cultural beliefs surrounding breast-feeding.\textsuperscript{182}
Hartley’s study of milk reflected the use of science to explain social and cultural phenomena in mid-nineteenth century America. Christian religious doctrine posited that the human experience was explained through good and evil, citing original sin and guided by the principles of the Ten Commandments. Science, conversely, explained the traits and practices of humanity as predisposed, genetic disposition to explain the human condition.183 One anonymous early public-health reformer in Antebellum New York used the mantra “cleanliness is next to godliness” to help justify efforts to pursue the public health.184 This reflected a shift from purely religious explanations of disease and death toward a scientific model.

This confidence in scientific knowledge is entwined in this era of reform, particularly in the explanation of epidemic disease (that was especially hard on the poor). The seeming detachment associated with scientific knowledge helped increase its authority. Tools like the microscope, for example, enabled science to contribute new knowledge about the nature of disease.185 This new, scientific knowledge provided a new, powerful narrative to help explain the way disease and illness spread. Leslie played on the public’s emerging faith in science: “We come now to speak of the swill milk as seen through the medium of scientific observation. The facts brought to light are startling in the extreme, and go to prove the truth of every assertion that we have made.”186

185 Paul Starr, The Social Transformation of Medicine, 136-137.
186 “The Origins of the Swill Milk Disease,” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, May 8, 1858.
The Association for Improving the Conditions of the Poor (AICP), part of the larger “scientific” reform movements, drafted laws to curtail truancy and give the police a tool for dealing with vagrant children. The AICP also organized efforts to “round the children up, then slot them, depending on character, into reformatories, schools or bourgeois-type homes.”

There was a widespread effort by mid-century to remove the poor and working classes — especially their children — from the streets and place them in the classroom. The population targeted by these reform efforts would later be Leslie’s core audience. Reformers seized opportunities to rescue idle, poor children, as they were seen as a threat to society. The shift away from apprenticeships that once provided children with room and board was going away as industrialized society moved into the factories.

The Public School Society (PSS) would begin the effort to build and run free schools, and by the 1850s a publically elected Board of Education would take over efforts to “provide an alternative to theaters and saloons.” These republican-minded reform efforts aimed to create good citizens through education, and newspaper reading certainly followed the path of these efforts. Some scholars estimate that literacy levels for white men was close to 90 percent in Antebellum America, and white women reached those rates by the end of the U.S. Civil war. What is unclear, however, is which ethnic groups constituted “whiteness” in 1858 New York City, questioning who was counted as literate. Considering that 25 percent of the city’s population was Irish, many of whom

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187 Burrows and Wallace, Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898, 780.
188 Ibid., 779-780.
189 Ibid., 780-781.
were new immigrants, undereducated and not recognized as “white,” this 90 percent literacy rate estimate may be high for the city.

Although reform based on the ideology of science was gaining momentum, government reformers, like Griscom, continued to run up against resistance to institute any widespread change in the city. We know that Leslie’s reporting exposed the need for health and sanitary reform, but the officials in New York City continued to move slowly to institute change. Elites often turned a blind eye to the filth and destitute, and they could afford to escape the city to rural locations, especially in the summer and fall when the rate of disease was especially high. Moreover, those reformers who tried to organize change often didn’t bother with government officials and went outside of the city’s political system to do their work.\textsuperscript{191}

As the city grew more dependent on industrialized labor, the realization that change needed to happen started to sink in with city officials. Because the working class was the backbone of this new, industrial-base economy, it would be in society's best interest to keep them healthy. Those in favor of government-led city infrastructure changes would look to Europe as a model. In England, for example, government involvement was justified in part by the universal economic and moral benefit of uplifting the poor. The British Parliament officially adopted the work of Edwin Chadwick, author of the 1842 “Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain.” Many of his recommendations were implemented.

\textsuperscript{191} Duffy, \textit{A History of Public Health in New York City}, 276.
Chadwick linked the health of the workforce to the health of business, and City Inspector Griscom would later freely use Chadwick’s work to make similar proposals for the city of New York.\textsuperscript{192} If the labor force was sick, that correlated with less productivity and diminishing income for business owners. Also, if the state took an interest in improving the living conditions of the poor, it could influence the number of years someone could be a productive citizen. Temperance advocates would especially appreciate Chadwick’s, and later Griscom’s, assertion about housing: with better living conditions, the working classes would spend more time at home and be less tempted to drink to oblivion in taverns and commit crimes. Chadwick concluded that the cost of improving the conditions of the poor would be less than money currently spent on supporting the poor in their current condition, not to mention the cost of running the orphanages that supported their offspring. The cost of premature death is greater that the money it would cost to help extend life — in other words, working life.\textsuperscript{193} If these people were some of Leslie’s core readers, he would also have an interest in the longevity of his working-class reading audience.

Unlike cities in Europe of similar size and scope, New York City has unique challenges that hindered the establishment of comprehensive government-led reforms. The heterogeneous make-up of New York’s population placed a unique challenge for those who wanted to reform its citizens. Cultural explanations, such as language barriers

\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., 305.
and religious differences, also help explain why reform was slow to evolve among the
new Americans.\textsuperscript{194} It has also been posited that many new immigrants to New York were
also suspicious of the efforts led by middle and elite classes to reform and sanitation
efforts in the city.\textsuperscript{195}

It is no understatement that New York City was riddled with crime and political
corruption in the Antebellum era. But one project that that stood in contrast to the
seeming indifference to the filth and inhumane living conditions and likely “restored faith
that the city could function for the public betterment” was the construction of Central
Park. Pushed by New York City Mayor Fernando Wood, the park was built between
1857-1860 and was the first urban park in the nation. Frederick Law Olmstead co-
designed the park and was appointed its superintendent. The area was transformed from
swampland that was inhabited by some of the cities’ poorest residents as a shantytown.
The park was conceptualized as a place to promote public health. Olmstead’s vision “saw
the Park as a way to educate the tenement-dwellers, and to enhance the sense of
community connecting rich and poor, Irish immigrants and Episcopalian Yankee.”\textsuperscript{196} In
an otherwise corrupt city government, the Central Park project was a real triumph over
the corruption and political bribes that typically accompanied city development projects.

\textsuperscript{194} Duffy, \textit{A History of Public Health in New York City}, 275.
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{196} Homberger, \textit{The Historical Atlas of New York City: A Visual Celebration of Nearly 400 Years of New York
City's History}, 88.
Politicians agreed on the project across party lines: it was positioned as an opportunity to uplift the poor, bridge class, religious and political differences.\textsuperscript{197}

The efforts made by mid-century reformers to curtail the problems brought about by New York’s growing pains foreshadow organizational practices that the city — and the nation — would later adopt. Textile manufacturing and the railroads, for example, organized labor before the Civil War and set the stage for the postwar realignment of work and labor that brought about modern capitalism. The “free market” values and legislation that led to the loosely regulated mass-producing market society has its roots in this period.\textsuperscript{198} The size and speed of growth would make their efforts outmoded and ineffective, and political corruption at the city level would impede any significant changes until well after the war. Today, the services that municipalities provide that we often take for granted, such as clean water, sewer systems and garbage, were still a work in progress in many U.S. urban centers such as New York. Many of the problems that plagued the city rested with the politicians who were more or less “winging it,” never seeing the likes of such rapid industrial and population growth to date. When Frank Leslie’s swill milk exposé hit the newsstands in May of 1858, city politicians and their appointees were still running New York City like a provincial city and not the rapidly expanding metropolis that is was.

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid., 88-89. There is evidence to suggest that the park was too far away for many of the working poor to get to. Need to find a source that talks more about the park and describes who frequented it.

Political Environment and Public Health Initiatives

The Tammany Hall political system that cartoonist Thomas Nast famously caricatured in the post-Civil War era was already a well-oiled machine by the 1850s. Elected officials promised jobs, food and legal counsel in exchange for votes, mostly from new immigrants not familiar with a “democratic” system of government. Public Health historian John Duffy speculates that by the mid-century, politicians were likely aware that preventive care had its benefits, but because it garnered little or no profit for middle-class voters, it was not a municipal priority, especially in the poor areas of the city.\textsuperscript{199} Politicians did not win votes from the merchant class and business community by proposing health reform, and the success of a political career did not hinge on public health policy and sanitary reform. And unlike other major metropolitan centers around the world — Paris, Brussels, Stockholm, etc. — New York City’s infrastructure was decentralized on purpose. A country founded on self-government naturally resisted concentrated power; many of the bourgeois and elite were suspicious of heavy-handed government oversight.\textsuperscript{200}

This distrust of government helps to explain why the practice of swill milk went unregulated and continued as long as it did. The topic of swill milk had been reported in other newspapers prior to Leslie’s depiction of the issue, linking “impure” and “distillery

\textsuperscript{199} Duffy, A History of Public Health in New York City.
\textsuperscript{200} Burrows and Wallace, Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898.
milk” to the cause of cholera infantum, as one article explained in 1847. Bourgeois conventions complicated how and what to do with the poor, who incidentally were the largest consumers of swill milk, according to reports at the time. Expanding government powers to help the poor went against the basic principles of Jacksonian-era politics that favored individual rights over government oversight, at least for the white, European population. Pauperism, they believed, encouraged laziness. The city also struggled financially throughout the first part of the century and simply did not set aside the resources for public assistance. Political leaders at the time insisted that the economic system was not to blame for the plight of the poor. Rather, it was the poor’s personal failings that caused their hardships.

**Political Shifts**

On a national level, ideological politics and sectionalist sentiments were strong. While they did not know it at the time, the country was only a few years away from civil war; northern and southern ways of life stood in sharp contrast to one another. The political coalitions of the Jackson Era were beginning to collapse, ultimately re-shuffling the national and local deck of political cards. Northern politics idealized the “self-made” individual who valued a progressive and free market, and Northern pundits painted a

\[\text{For example, in a New York Herald article from July of 1847, the large number of deaths, especially among infants and children, was attributed to the impure milk produced by cows fed on distillery slop. See "Mortality of the City," New York Herald, July 28, 1847.} \]

\[\text{Burrows and Wallace, Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898, 622-624.} \]

\[\text{Ibid., 620.} \]

\[\text{Foner, Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War.} \]
picture of the South as backward, aristocratic and anti-capitalist.\textsuperscript{205} And in the city of New York, now the largest city in the North, the political divides often fell along socio-economic class boundaries.

The various health boards were a part of city government and had to work with the Mayor’s office, and these boards did not always see eye to eye with the Mayor. During the years leading up to Leslie’s exposure of the swill milk trade, the city’s charismatic mayor Tammany politician Fernando Wood would help shape the city’s character. He was first elected as a congressman in 1840 and later returned to New York, where he built his wealth in real estate and the shipping industry, always with fraud charges hanging over his head. Running as Democrat and a “true friend to the Irish” in 1850 for mayor, Wood lost but returned to win in 1854, allegedly winning more votes in some area of the city, like the Irish Sixth District, than there were voters.\textsuperscript{206} Reviled by reform-minded citizens and his political opponents, Wood managed to stay above the fray while being the designer of the high jinks in New York political life.\textsuperscript{207} But, at the same time, Wood’s administration managed to surprise his opponent from time to time by pushing reform-minded initiatives, such as a crackdown on prostitution and improvements to the city’s streets and water system. In 1856, remarking on Wood’s first year in office, Leslie’s wrote, “His triumph [referring to his election as Mayor] was regarded in many respectable quarters as a misfortune to the city, and a good people felt

\textsuperscript{206} Burrows and Wallace, \textit{Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898}, 831-832.
\textsuperscript{207} Homberger, \textit{The Historical Atlas of New York City: A Visual Celebration of Nearly 400 Years of New York City's History}, 84
alarmed for the result. Mr. Wood was finally installed into office and promptly began an administration of our municipal affairs that finally extorted the phrase from his bitterest personal foes and political opponents.\(^{208}\) The article continued to talk about this short-lived reprieve for Wood, but he soon made the news again for neglecting the city’s infrastructure. Contracts to clean up the city streets during a disease outbreak was a lucrative contract to win from the city, and Wood’s administration was accused of taking bribes.\(^ {209}\) Reformers and republican-minded people like Leslie must not have expected much from Wood, considering their well-established opposition to one another.

While reformers must have been pleasantly surprised by Wood’s early efforts to clean up the city, as Leslie’s newspaper acknowledges in the quote above, larger political forces continued to work against Wood and his mostly foreign-born supporters. A law requiring the mostly Irish-run saloons to obtain city licenses was viewed as an attack on Wood’s authority, for example. While temperance-minded ordinances such as saloon licensing cut down on unhealthy drinking, these laws were conversely seen as attempts to control behavior and not created to help the poor and immigrant populations. Because state legislators were under the assumption that Wood and his political allies would not enforce these new laws, they installed their own to positions of power in city government, and even established a competing police force, Metropolitan, to challenge Wood’s Municipal police force.\(^ {210}\)

\(^{208}\) “Honorable Fernando Wood,” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, August 9, 1856.
\(^{209}\) Duffy, A History of Public Health in New York City.
\(^{210}\) Burrows and Wallace, Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898, 835-837.
Frank Leslie and other newspaper editors would criticize Mayor Wood’s office for turning a blind eye to political and market corruption that left the poor and new citizens to fend for themselves. But other political offices and appointed officials would also receive heavy criticism. City Aldermen, for example, would be the focus of Leslie’s critical eye in his reporting on the filthy, overcrowded and disease-ridden distillery stables. The city council, known as the Common Council, was a check against the mayor’s office. They were responsible for handing out city contracts, organizing subcommittees for city investigations, and reflected the wide range of political representation in the city. The council earned the nickname “Council of Forty Thieves” for their Tammany-style politicking that included taking bribes in exchange for keeping business regulations to a minimum. In the swill milk reports, Leslie was particularly hard on Alderman Tuomey and Alderman Reed, both of whom would later sue Leslie for libel.211

The City Inspector’s office was tasked to investigate public health issues, which would include Leslie’s accusations against the swill milk industry. But the work of inspectors largely involved inspecting cargo ships for disease and controlling outbreaks of infection, such as cholera. This office was also responsible for statistics about people (e.g. death counts and causes), inspect buildings and enforce fire regulations. This was a high caliber office in the city, and from time to time city inspectors wielded a good deal

211 Leslie’s accusation of political corruption on the part of these two men and the subsequent lawsuit will be examined in a later chapter.
of influence on how the city handled public health issues, such as outbreaks of disease.\textsuperscript{212} The aforementioned Griscom, “a learned and pious Quaker physician” is one of the more notable inspectors, and while his time in office predated Leslie’s pictorial exposé, Leslie would later use his work to bolster his reporting. Griscom had much experience with impoverished populations, having served in the New York Dispensary and the New York Hospital.\textsuperscript{213} Appointed to the City Inspector position in 1842, Griscom was one of the more aggressive reformers who stood outside of the corrupt political system.\textsuperscript{214} Critical of greedy landlords who converted their basement and cellars to living quarters for the poor that he called “living graves for human beings,” Griscom pulled no punches when it came to proposing changes to the crowded and constantly filthy living conditions.\textsuperscript{215} In neighbors such as Five Points, garbage was routinely thrown into the streets in the hopes that roaming animals would eat the waste, since the city-run carts that were supposed to come and take garbage away never came to the neighborhood. One toilet might be shared by as many as 50 people.\textsuperscript{216} Seeing this as a very solvable problem, Griscom proposed the construction of an all-inclusive sewage system and free water for everyone in the city. He also wanted landlords to be required to provide reasonable space and proper ventilation for renters (he found as many as 48 people in one building’s cellar).\textsuperscript{217}

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\textsuperscript{212} Duffy, A History of Public Health in New York City.
\textsuperscript{213} Burrows and Wallace, Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898, 784.
\textsuperscript{214} Duffy and Foundation, A History of Public Health in New York City.
\textsuperscript{215} Burrows and Wallace, Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898, 784.
\textsuperscript{216} Anbinder, Five Points: The 19th-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World’s Most Notorious Slum, 77-82.
\textsuperscript{217} Burrows and Wallace, Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898, 784.
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Griscom, unlike his contemporaries, went against “conventional bourgeois wisdom” and did not place the blame on the poor for their deplorable living environment.\textsuperscript{218} Griscom, at times, was persuasive by appealing to New Yorkers’ pocketbooks. Helping the poor was not just a humanitarian issue but a matter of self-interest. “Bad housing meant sick workers, and sick workers meant low profits, higher relief outlays, and higher taxes.”\textsuperscript{219} But Griscom would not be reappointed to a second term as City Inspector, as his radical proposals for change went against the sensibilities of the city’s leadership who preferred buying off judges, police and creating “dummy” institutions to provide themselves with kickbacks of public projects.\textsuperscript{220}

\textit{Class Politics and Managing Health}

Enfranchisement was among the social changes in New York and elsewhere in the country that would help bring into question \textit{laissez-faire} governing that accompanied Protestant-based politics. Non-land owning men had been able to vote in citywide elections since 1834. In that election, the winning Aldermen were mostly Whig, but in the mayoral election a Democrat narrowly defeated the Whig candidate.\textsuperscript{221} The trend of divided political party elections continued to the time when Leslie published his swill milk exposé. In the 1850s it is estimated that the middle class, many of whom were city merchants, were over 75\% Whig. These middle class citizens, as a group, were likely attracted to the Whig’s pledge to improve the city’s infrastructure, as well as the

\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., 784.
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., 785.
\textsuperscript{221} Homberger, \textit{The Historical Atlas of New York City: A Visual Celebration of Nearly 400 Years of New York City's History}, 80-81.
Protestant-based values this party ostensibly held. But in citywide elections, a Democratic mayor was most often elected.

A new socio-economic class was voting, and their needs could no longer be ignored. Immigrant and working-class citizens are often cited as Frank Leslie’s readers, and this aligned politically more often with the Democrat Party. While daily New York newspapers such as Horace Greeley’s republican-leaning *News Tribune* and James Gordon Bennett’s conservative *Herald* probably did not see Leslie’s “picture paper” as a threat to their readership, they could not ignore Leslie’s influence on the public and city government. Leslie often claimed political independence in the pages of his illustrated newspaper, but an analysis that follows of his swill milk reporting will reveal a republican-minded editor and publisher. Conversely, the privileged were not particularly politically active in New York City. While elites surely engaged in reading the newspapers, many turned a blind eye to the corruption that surrounded them but did not directly affect them. And, unlike the lower classes, elites had the means to live far from the pestilent areas of the city by moving uptown, or escaping the city altogether to their country estates.\(^\text{222}\)

For those who wanted to stick around and change the city, it was best to bypass local city politics. Reformers in the city spent their time appealing to the New York State Legislature to create laws and governing bodies for city improvements, such as keeping the city streets clean and controlling disease outbreak — two major health concerns at the

time. Politicians at the state level seemed to recognize the need to have some sort of health and sanitation strategy. The state legislature created what public health historian John Duffy calls “semi-independent commissions and agencies” to shift power away from city officials in order to get some things done in the interest of public well being. The state government moved into city politics as early as 1796 when it established the “Health Office.” Also known as “Commissioners of Health,” this was an assemblage of a health officer, a physician and commissioner. These officers were appointed by the state and were mainly in charge of quarantine efforts during times of outbreaks of cholera and other contagion outbreaks and to inspect incoming ships for contagious disease.²²³ The justification for the state’s involvement seems obvious now: these health boards needed to operate independently in order to keep a check on commercial and business interests that did not have the public’s best interests in mind.²²⁴

Unlike today, in Frank Leslie’s time, no permanent government bodies existed to manage problems concerning the public’s health. Many of the ordinances that tried to contain health problems, like epidemic disease, were temporary. When problems emerged, the city government was still thinking provincially and organized ad hoc committees. By the turn of the nineteenth century, the City Inspector’s Office was given the task of dealing with health issues that afflicted the city. For example, in 1804 the office activated an administrative division called the Board of Health that was active during the summer months when disease spread at a fast pace. The Mayor’s office and his

²²³ Duffy, A History of Public Health in New York City.
²²⁴ Ibid., 276-277.
Aldermen were in charge of this Board and operated in a reactionary mode rather than a preventive one.\textsuperscript{225} Considering the Board’s make-up, it is no wonder why change was slow and arduous. City Aldermen were also members of the Board of Health; they paid themselves extra to serve.\textsuperscript{226}

The importance of the Board of Health waxed and waned along with the outbreaks of epidemic disease in the city. Occasionally, the decision-making process would appear to be proactive. An Asiatic cholera outbreak in 1832 prompted the Board of Health to request federal assistance to monitor incoming ships from Europe for disease-carrying passengers.\textsuperscript{227} And as cholera hit the city hard again in 1849, the New York Tribune — normally critical of the city government — commended the Board for its efforts. The Tribune’s compliment was likely due to the additional appointment of a Sanitary Committee that was made up of physicians and lay people to help deal with the problem.\textsuperscript{228} But the \textit{ad hoc} nature of these bodies weakened the Board’s position, and this had consequences. With loyalties divided, the Board and the Mayor’s office sometimes denied the presence of cholera in the city. Based on claims of maintaining law and order, they justified their denials of contagious disease. These denials, meant to alleviate public panic, instead damaged the reputation of the Board and marginalized its efforts to control the spread of disease.\textsuperscript{229}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid., 280-281. \\
\textsuperscript{226} Ibid., 286-287. \\
\textsuperscript{227} Ibid., 281. \\
\textsuperscript{228} Ibid., 290. \\
\textsuperscript{229} Ibid., 284. 
\end{flushleft}
Another cholera outbreak in 1854 drew more criticism of city government. Physicians’ groups and newspaper editors alike denounced the Board of Health for its inaction and their tendency to be reactive rather than proactive on matters of the public’s health. *The Weekly Herald* urged the city to do more regarding cholera outbreaks in the city, especially among the poor: “… it is high time The Board of Health should adopt proper measures to remedy these evils… if they have not sufficient sagacity to devise a plan of their own, that they appoint a committee to visit other cities and make inquiries on the subject of preserving the public health.”\textsuperscript{230} The Board’s lack of transparency did not help its reputation either.\textsuperscript{231} Whether it was improving housing codes, labor laws or transportation infrastructure, Aldermen could be bribed easily and block such government intervention. Protecting business interests and keeping government out of public enterprise was the tenor of the time.\textsuperscript{232}

If city officials were willing to lie about the presence of epidemic disease in the city, it is no wonder they did not address concerns about nefarious milk production practices in the city. Less than two years before Leslie would publish his swill milk images, the New York *Herald* acknowledged that the Board of Health had done some good by keeping the city’s streets clean, but it was now failing to control disease in August of that year. Now organized as the “Commissioners of Health” Board, the *Herald* published board member’s salaries, which included Mayor Wood, and asked readers what

\textsuperscript{230} "Local News," *The Weekly Herald*, June 17, 1854.
\textsuperscript{232} Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*, 826.
they were actually doing. “The fact is,” the report said, “the feeling has been growing among our commercial men that this Board, as at present constituted, is a very absurd institution… Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been lost by the owners of ships and consignees of goods this summer by the detention of vessels and merchandise at the Quarantine.” It went on to say that, despite the Board’s efforts, yellow fever had spread to Long Island and making its way into the city.233

In addition to the press, The Medical Society of New York, an independent body of physicians and medical professionals, was another voice critical of the seeming incompetence of city officials.234 During the 1832 outbreak mentioned above, the society independently announced the presence of the disease in the city. Asserting their authority, city officials criticized the Medical Society for weakening the city’s trade and industrial performance.235 As a part of the professionalization movement, medical societies were attempting to establish and assert authority in a culture that was not always supportive. For example, standards for earning degrees in medicine made weaker instead of stronger under an open, democratic ethos. “The openness of society,” says Paul Starr, “and the ambitions of their fellow subverted their efforts.”236 This mindset helps explain the sluggish progress regarding any substantial reform in mid-century America.

234 It is important to remember that the profession of medicine was in its infancy, and the authority groups like these enjoy today. Like other occupations, the professionalization of medicine reflects a larger trend, as society organized as industrial nations.
235 Duffy, A History of Public Health in New York City, 284.
236 Starr, The Social Transformation of American Medicine, 54-55.
Given that the government was inconsistent when responding to the myriad public health issues facing the city, it is no surprise that city officials took little action in the regulation of the dairy industry and the swill milk stables. But as the city grew more crowded, the space separating elites and the poor became smaller. Limited space also put many in closer proximity to the urban dairy stables, making the output of swill milk production difficult to ignore. Anyone who has driven by a farm with livestock has likely experienced the noxious smell of manure. Imagine if those same smells wafted from a dairy stable a few yards from your home in a stable housing 1000 cows that was designed for a mere 150 to 200 cattle.

**Conclusion**

Michael Egan offers this explanation of Frank Leslie’s attempt through his newspaper to overthrow the swill milk industry: “Leslie probably saw his crusade as an attempt not just to arouse public awareness, but also to spark public action…. Leslie promoted his exposé as the catalyst for social change that stokes the fires of public activism.” As subsequent chapters will show through an analysis of Leslie’s reporting, it is fairly clear that he was an early advocate of market regulation, demanding that milk producers be licensed and regularly inspected to ensure cows were supplied with proper nutrition, thereby ensuring a quality milk product. However, Leslie’s choice to investigate the swill milk producers was also strategic. Of the many social problems

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238 Ibid., 206.
facing Antebellum New York, the milk supply in the city would be of personal concern to many, and especially to his female readers.

It would take another 20 years for legislation to pass that helped fortify the inspection process of milk and other dairy products. There are several reasons why the swill milk problem persisted as long as it did. First, the New York City infrastructure was simply unable to handle its exploding population. The division between the urban poor and wealthy was expanding both physically and financially. As the city and its surrounding boroughs grew more congested, those with financial means moved away from the densely populated areas and could afford the more expensive milk from grass-fed cows. The poor, with no political power, were left with few alternatives to the milk produced by the urban-based dairies that produced and distributed the swill.

Bureaucratic concern for “public health” was an emerging idea in 1858 when Leslie’s published previously unseen images of diseased and dying cows linked to the production of tainted milk. At the time, attempts to address disease and other problems that threatened public health were temporary and inadequate. Residents of New York City during this period struggled to meet their daily health needs, and the growing population increased the demand for milk, resulting in the swill milk practice. While the

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239 Duffy, 133. In 1878 the state of New York passed a series of laws to protect daily products from being sullied, and these laws seemed to be aimed, in part, at protecting the health of the public.
240 Porter, Localization and Health Salvation in the United States, 148.
242 There are several histories that address mass disease epidemics such as syphilis, cholera, influenza, and water-borne illness or food supply issues.
press had covered the practice as early as the 1820s, city and state officials failed to take any serious action against the urban dairy producers.

The problems associated with rise of the city in the nineteenth century reflect the problems associated with modern capitalism, namely the exploitation and alienation of humankind.243 The swill milk problem is illustrative of the ideological differences in how best to govern. Expanding government powers to help the poor, for example, went against the basic principles of Jacksonian-era liberalism that favored individual rights over heavy-handed government.244 Self-sufficiency was favored over government paternalism, and so social change came slowly to New York City.245 Cultural explanations such as language barriers, religious differences and suspicion of government could also help explain why public health reform was slow to evolve among the newly emigrated Americans.246

Art historian Jonathan Crary explains that the visual transformation of the public sphere in the nineteenth century “produced a new kind of observer” and contributed to a “massive reorganization of knowledge and social practices.”247 Among these social practices would be Frank Leslie’s efforts and his desire to publish an image-driven newspaper. Leslie’s pictorial reporting on the swill milk business was widely credited for

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246 Duffy, 275.
finally putting the swill milk problem in front of politicians and the public. It was only when people observed — through pictures in the mass media — the real nature of the swill milk industry that any real action was taken to investigate whether or not swill milk was a public health nuisance. The following chapter situates Frank Leslie’s pictorial exposé in the context of nineteenth century journalism changes, the rise of visual culture, and the transformation of the business of the newspaper from an elite endeavor to a mass medium.
Chapter Three: Nineteenth Century Newspapers and the Development of Pictorial Reporting

Illustrated papers have become a feature. Every newspaper stand is covered with them. Every railroad train is filled with them. They are “object-teaching” to the multitude. They make the battlefields, the coronations, the corruption of politics... the race course... and Grant and Sherman familiar to everyone. They are, in brief, the art gallery of the world. Single admission, ten cents.

Frederic Hudson, 1873

Hudson’s Journalism in the United States was published at a time when illustrated newspapers and periodicals were an important and growing part of the media landscape. The above passage is often used in scholarship as evidence of the ubiquity and popularity of the illustrated press in the later part of the nineteenth century. In 1884 a government census report stated, "there were in 1880 no less [sic] than 481 periodicals which were regularly illustrated." S.N.D. North, the author of the report, observed that, over time, the ability to create and reproduce illustrations for newspapers improved and became more affordable. By the end of the nineteenth century, images in illustrated and photographic form were established in U.S. newspapers and periodicals.

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248 Journalism in the United States from 1690 to 1872 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1873), 705.
249 Brown, Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America. and Connery, Journalism and Realism: Rendering American Life.
The illustrated press changed journalism, and the mass distribution of images through the newspaper spurred the democratization of the image. When realistic representations of everyday life were introduced through line drawings and woodcuts in the mid-century press — sometimes called engravings — many citizens could see their “reality” reflected back at them for the first time. The authors of *The Form of News* say that the rise of the illustrated press coincides with realism culture in the mid-nineteenth century evident in the arts and sciences. The illustrated press also mirrors the rise of the professionalization of news, growing out of the partisan press and reaching its pinnacle with the “routinized pattern of news production and with a new range of mass-circulation popular magazines.”

In an instant, an image can instantly put a reader at the scene of a crime, for example, or on the inside of a dairy stable surrounded by dead and dying cows. Antebellum editors like Leslie would experiment and perfect the reproduction of images for mass production, forever changing the landscape of journalism and news. Leslie’s illustrated press reached its heyday during the U.S. Civil War, along with its chief competitor, *Harper’s Weekly*, by churning out images of war week after week, both creating and meeting public demands for news about the war in pictorial form.

This chapter presents an overview of the newspaper and publishing industry in the mid-nineteenth century. In the context of the preceding chapter, I offer an interpretation of the newspaper business as influenced by the larger social, economic and cultural forces

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of change in the city of New York in the mid-century. First, I offer some more detailed bibliographic information about Frank Leslie. His passion and determination to create a successful newspaper devoted to pictorial reporting is a fundamental part of the development of American visual journalism. Many accounts of Leslie’s contributions are followed by a discussion of the press as an institution, considering the social influences, economic circumstances and technological developments that helped accelerate the mass production and distribution of news. I also draw on scholarship that places the illustrated newspaper in a rapidly expanding visual culture.

**Frank Leslie and his Illustrated Newspaper**

Scholars of the illustrated press agree that editor, illustrator and publisher Frank Leslie is the “father” of American pictorial reporting. *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* fulfilled the professional ambitions of its editor, who is responsible for perfecting the engraving process that allowed news illustration to become a compelling and integral element in news reporting. Born Henry Carter Leslie arrived in 1848 to New York City as a young adult to pursue illustrated publishing in the United States. He took “Frank Leslie” for his American moniker and opened a shop in New York City. Leslie quickly put to use the skills he honed as an illustrator at the *Illustrated London News (ILN).* *ILN* reflected Victorian ethos of the day and published high-minded content, illustrating royal events, natural history, landscapes and “sanitized” images of...

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253 So much of what we know about Frank Leslie is thanks to the historical work of Budd Leslie Gambee, Jr. and Madeline Stern. Contemporary historians that study the American illustrated press owe a great debt to these two individuals.

254 *ILN* began publication in May of 1842.
public life. Competing pictorial papers, such as *Punch* and the *Pictorial Times*, drew competing images, often in the form of cartoons and caricatures of the day’s happenings. Learning his craft as an illustrator under these circumstances, Leslie was undoubtedly influenced in how he approached illustrating the news. Yet it was not until his arrival in America that he would meet the man that most likely influenced his career ambitions.

Showman Phineas T. Barnum was an early employer who originally hired Leslie to create illustrate materials to promote his tours, one promotion being for the Swedish opera singer, Jenny Lind. Barnum later hired Leslie to manage his *Illustrated American News*. Having served as Barnum’s production manager, Leslie learned a great deal about what worked and what did not in the pictorial news business. Sometime in 1851, Leslie moved to Boston for a period of time to work for America’s first newspaper dedicated to illustrations, *Gleason’s Pictorial Drawing-Room*. Joshua Brown notes that, much like the *Illustrated American News*, *Gleason’s* also limited the kind of news they would publish. Leaving *Gleason’s* to work briefly for Barnum again, Leslie soon after set out to begin his own publication. Leslie felt that the fastest way to turn a profit was to produce a fashion magazine, and so *Frank Leslie’s Ladies’ Gazette of Fashion*

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260 Ibid.
261 Barnum started the *Illustrated News* in 1852 and eventually sold the publication to *Gleason’s*. 97
and Fancy Needlework commenced production in January of 1854. In a time when women outside of the poor and working classes did not pursue careers outside home, Leslie hired Ann Stephens to edit his women’s magazine. Leslie would also purchase a fiction-based periodical and repackage it with his own name and add more illustrated content. While his earlier publications did not place quite the emphasis on illustrations that his later publication would, the practice certainly set the tone and the process to produce illustrations quickly and efficiently. He would later use the proceeds from these publications to finance *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*.\(^{262}\)

There is much to be assumed about Leslie’s relationship with P.T. Barnum, the world-famous promoter at the time. He undoubtedly learned self-promotion as an employee of Barnum and also learned “a penchant for overstatement,” says journalism historian William Huntzicker.\(^{263}\) Leslie seemed to combine his time learning illustration skills in London with his first years working in the United States when he set out to open his own publishing business. Huntzicker says that Leslie exhibited “a sense of self-importance” that was acquired from his time working at the *London Illustrated News* and “a penchant for overstatement” from his time working for Barnum.\(^{264}\) It seems fair to speculate that Leslie learned techniques that Barnum used to create excitement around an event in order to drive ticket sales. Furthermore, although it would be unfair to judge Leslie as merely a profit-seeking publishing tycoon, choosing swill milk as a pet project

\(^{263}\) Huntzicker, "Frank Leslie." 212.
\(^{264}\) Ibid.
had all the makings of a great story: children were dying, animals were suffering, mothers were seemingly helpless against large and corrupt industry which was “in cahoots” with the local municipality. Easy targets such as the dirty, unkempt immigrants were hostile and adversarial to add drama to the narrative of swill milk. This investigation was one of many that Leslie’s would report at his news-oriented illustrated newspaper that distinguished him from other illustrated periodicals of the period in America. While Leslie’s fiercest competitor, *Harper’s Weekly*, was back by one of the nation’s largest book publishers, Leslie sought a niche for timely news. *Harper’s*, on the other hand, was known for publishing literature and art content, often reusing illustrations from its other publications. Barnhurst and Nerone explain: “Leslie insisted that it was a newspaper and maintained an emphasis on breaking news.”

Despite competition from the well-established publishing houses such as Harper Brothers, Leslie’s survived when competing illustrated newspapers did not. As a pioneer in the field, Leslie and his associates significantly contributed to visual conventions and standards that we take for granted today.

Leslie was also a technological innovator. He is credited with perfecting the process of illustrating the news, once a slow, laborious process. An image appearing in the newspaper went through several steps before it was realized: Starting with an original, sketch artists in the office drew a second version of the picture to be transferred to the

266 *Harper’s Weekly* started 1857 to directly compete with Leslie’s. *Ballou’s Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* purchased Gleason’s in 1854 and folded in 1857.
block, and then a hand-carved engraving was inked and pressed to imprint the illustration on to paper. But Leslie devised a way to expedite the production process in order to bring timely, detailed visual news to his readers. Employing methods of mass production, he divided the division of labor in order to create high-quality engravings at a fast pace. Advances in printing press speeds also helped; The Taylor Perfecting Press that he purchased in 1858 “significantly increased the speed of printing,” according to Brown. It is likely no coincidence that Leslie was able to publish a prolific number of illustrated content in relation to his swill milk investigation that same year.

Leslie’s business strategy targeted a wide audience for financial survival, and his audience grew larger as the demand for illustrated news grew. Brown explains the effect of this new form of news: “The [illustrated] paper’s contribution to reporting lay in its rapid visualization of the topical and in its transformation of news into a detailed pictorial narrative provided by a new type of journalist, the artist-reporter or ‘special artist.’” Frank Leslie is credited with advancing the process of reproducing images and being a central figure in creating an audience and desire for news to come in the form of illustrated content. Furthermore, his pictorial exposé of New York’s swill milk scandal that began in May of 1858 is recognized as the first popular pictorial investigative news

267 Brown, Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America, 40.
269 Brown, Beyond the Lines, 32-33.
story. Leslie and other illustrated newspapers would later evolve to provide the public with much sought-after news and information reporting just a few years later during the U.S. Civil War.

New York and Antebellum Publishing

Much like other aspects of nineteenth-century life, the transformation of the press in this period is characterized in part by reform. Journalism historians recognize that during the mid-nineteenth century, journalism editors and publishers became more thoughtful about their role in society. This sentiment certainly reflected Leslie’s ambition to report the news about swill milk to his readers to champion change in the milk-producing industry. As journalism historian Hazel Dicken-Garcia explains, the mid-century reflects a period where journalists and editors understood their role more as “a positive influence on society and other institutions.” While the country’s colonial-era press was dominated by partisan politics and elites, Leslie’s illustrated newspaper flourished during a period when political, social and technical transformations helped shift newspapers to a mass medium. The content and function of the press, Dicken-Garcia says, “reflected America’s primary interest in fashioning a new form of government and debating ideas for the country’s development.”

272 Ibid., 155.
273 Ibid., 30.
While political newspapers dominated printed information for the first half of the century, these political presses began losing ground to the growing number of non-partisan, information-driven publications that emerged in the 1830s. Coined “penny papers,” their name reflects their relatively inexpensive price tag when compared with the elite partisan papers. Michael Schudson explains that the penny papers newspapers, “broke with tradition and established the model which the mainstream of American journalism has since followed.”

Entrepreneurial-minded individuals such as Benjamin H. Day, for example, seized on the opportunity to create a newspaper with a wide appeal. First published in 1833, Day’s New York Sun is considered the first successful penny paper in the United States. Penny papers like the Sun included “short, breezy items, with some theatrical notices, paragraphs about monstrosities and prodigies, and an emphasis on crime news.”

Content was aimed at capturing the public’s attention, perhaps at the expense of high-minded political commentary. The Sun out-circulated the more expensive papers, claiming daily sales of 5000 copies by 1834; just a few years earlier, the average circulation for the average newspaper was 1200. Penny papers relied on daily street sales as opposed to yearly subscriptions, and the bustling city of New York provided an ideal space for the growth of the penny paper. Other New York publishers would follow this new model of human interest and sensationalistic reporting, most

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notably newspaper moguls James Gordon Bennett’s *Herald* in May of 1835 and Horace Greeley and his New York *Tribune*, which began publication in April 1841.

The very nature of the penny press was to attract and captivate an audience, and cheap prices would help drive sales. The political newspapers were pricey; many cost as much as six cents per copy. Lower in price, the penny papers allowed a new segment of the population to purchase newspapers; these less expensive one or two cent papers were affordable to lower- and middle-income readers. Penny papers were sold on the streets and did not rely solely on a yearly subscription model, thus avoiding another cost of sending newspapers through the mail.277 By the 1850s, cheap prices would help newspapers become New York’s fourth largest industry, making Manhattan and its surrounding boroughs an “ink-drenched” community.278 Bennett’s New York *Herald* and Greeley’s New York *Tribune* were the top two circulating newspapers in the city, contributing to the ever-increasing number of newspapers in the city. By one estimate, there was one newspaper for every 4.5 residents in New York in 1850. And on Sunday, newspaper saturation was even more remarkable, with one newspaper for every 2.2 people.279

As a cultural production, the penny press in New York was an expression of what was happening and connected readers to the reality of urban living. While *Leslie’s* would

279 Ibid., 677.
not come along for a few more years, the penny press served as a model. Journalism historian Thomas Connery says that, “The penny papers carried in their content the familiar, sense-making narratives of the antebellum period, but occasionally — and more and more frequently — also carried the tensions, fears, and confusion reflected in a changing society.” Frank Leslie’s crusade against swill milk producers appeared to mirror the growing pains experienced in New York, such as the laissez faire politics that let businesses like swill milk go unchecked by government regulation for years.

Changes in the printing industry that allowed newspapers to reach a mass audience were in sync with sweeping industrial changes happening in cities, especially in the northern part of the country. The economic base shifted from smaller, artisan-run businesses to larger manufacturing operations, and the newspaper business was at the vanguard of these changes. By the launch of Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, New York City was “the nation’s information center, a fountain from which news and novels, stock quotes and lithographs flowed in ceaseless profusion,” according to the authors of Gotham. Journalism historian Frank Luther Mott further explains how New York gained national attention: “[T]he great New York papers had usurped the limelight [from Washington’s political papers]. They had led the contests in news transmission, in cooperative news-gathering, in large circulations, and in political influence.” With an emphasis on information, as opposed to partisan politics, many penny newspapers in New

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281 Ibid., 27.
York provided people with information about life in the city and government affairs that they could relate to and understand. As the rise of the middle- and working-class reader increased media demand, these new consumers had some purchasing sway. The pictorial news content in periodicals such as Leslie’s would further any reader’s understanding of their world.

While technology did not allow for the reproduction of photographs in newspapers at the time, other technological advances did contribute to the growth of the newspaper. Enhancements in printing from single-cylinder to double-cylinder presses multiplied the number of impressions per hour. Penny press innovator Day harnessed the power of steam for his presses, and other printers later copied his methods. Industrial improvements that led to the cheaper processing of raw materials and improving printing techniques put more newspaper out on the streets and into the hands of ordinary citizens. Advances in papermaking lowered the overall cost of producing newspapers, a fact that Mott cites as a large reason for the existence of the penny papers. The economic wheel that spurred the popularity of newspapers was not lost on Frank Leslie. His illustrated newspaper would be among the explosion of printed matter that would further connect individuals to their neighborhood as well as their governing social institutions.

The technology enhancements and the cheaper resources that allowed the press to flourish were fundamental to the spread and consumption of news, increasing the
newspaper-per-person ratio. The penny press also made everyday reading available to a larger and more socially and economically diverse audience. Increased literacy opened up new opportunities for reading. And the news business would benefit from reform efforts to educate immigrants and non-elite citizen through public education efforts. From the 1830s to the 1860s, Mott says that the number of newspaper tripled, from the Northeast to the Western outposts in settled territories. Another source interprets that the number of magazines in the United States grew six times its size between 1825 and 1850. The expansion of the franchise by the 1840s nationwide may have had an impact on news consumption. By mid-century the number of newspapers increased along with an increase in circulation numbers when more white men were given the right to vote. Mott observes, “In many respects the thirties and forties formed a period of social and economic awakening and of reform movement.”

The mid-century U.S. newspaper marked the commercial turn in news and information. Journalism was supported financially by the printing business and grew into a “big business,” intensified and “never turned back” (as we know all too well today), according to the authors of Fanatics and Fire-Eaters: Newspapers and the Coming of the Civil War. Newspaper owners like Frank Leslie promoted yearly subscriptions for their product, but shifting economic models for commercial newspaper would gradually shift the newspaper’s revenue model to a greater reliance on advertisers for financial

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288 Ibid., 303.
290 Mott, American Journalism, a History: 1690-1960, 304.
The larger printing houses were the main employers of news reporters during this period, and along with advertising revenue, most newspapers were subsidized by a the printing business that published other materials, such as books, sheet music and other popular printed materials. The advertising-based model would come with its own share of problems, one being the multitude of “quack” advertisements for patents medicines. While some of the more “high class” papers refused medicine ads, others refused to censor advertisers and called upon readers to take up their complaints with the advertisers themselves and not the paper where the advertisement was printed.

In addition to the changes happening on a commercial and industrial level, new tools and equipment in the home also helped shape and expand newspaper readership. For example, the widespread adoption of gas lighting and oil lamps in the 1830s and 1840s made reading more pleasant than by candlelight. Advances in steam-engine technology and ever-expanding rail system (mostly in the North), made news out of New York available to people beyond the city, another contributing factor to New York’s news and information dominance in the country. Lowered postage rates also enabled metropolitan papers to be cheaply distributed regionally and nationally. And the development of the telegraph would serve as a critical tool for journalism and the newspaper business. In New York, early telegraph use connected police stations to one

292 Schudson, Discovering the News, 18.
294 Mott, American Journalism, a History: 1690-1960, 301-302.
295 Ibid., 304.
296 Ratner and Teeter, Jr. Fanatics and Fire-Eaters, 8-19.
another and also helped shape New York as a financial hub; the New York Stock Exchange used the technology to transmit stock information throughout the nation.  

*Ethnic and Specialty Publications*

*Leslie’s* illustrated newspaper would be one of many alternative papers to the mainstream press and the penny papers that emerged and enjoyed success by mid century. While penny presses were aimed at a wide audience, much like Leslie’s ambitions with his newspaper, the technical and cultural shifts that led to increased newspaper readership also spurred specialty publications that targeted certain communities of readers. In the city of New York, there was a kaleidoscope of printed materials, and immigrants and non-elites alike would have a variety of newspapers to choose from. For example, foreign language and ethnic publications that grew in popularity alongside the penny press. English alternatives such as The *New Yorker* *Staats-Seitung* by Jacob Uhl, which began as a weekly paper in 1824, grew to become a well-known German-language daily newspaper. New York led the nation in foreign-language newspapers, supporting publications in French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, and Norwegian, to name a few. These newspapers were also sent back to home countries for relatives to read news about the United States. Not only did these newspapers provide information in a native tongue, but they also covered issues and topics ignored or marginalized by the mainstream press. Foreign language newspapers along with other

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299 Ibid.
“outsider” publications, such as Native American, African-American, abolition and women’s suffrage presses, represented voices that challenged the sociopolitical and economic hegemony of the mainstream press. The authors of *Outsiders in the 19th-Century Press History* characterize media outside of the mainstream as, “fail[ing] to create bridges between cultures; nor did it adequately reflect the diversity of American society.” But others, like the Chinese-language newspapers, often started by “well-meaning white missionaries and supported by businessmen” that may not have had the population’s best interests in mind.

These “outsider” antebellum specialized publications were supported by their respective special interests, and churches were among the entities supporting specialty presses. Mott says that all religious sects had their own periodicals and dominated the specialty press trade. Farmers and professions such as the legal, education and insurance fields published periodicals. And the medical press would grow in popularity in the mid-century as well. *The Lancet*, for example, published for the medical industry and embraced the use of images and photography as “the Art of Truth.” By the middle of the century, a vibrant medical press "was an enthusiastic advocate for photography." The medical profession used images to help legitimate their profession to a public

304 Ibid.
skeptical of medical expertise and advancement.\textsuperscript{305} It seems that every conceivable trade was pushing their own publications: “Railroad engineers, carriage makers, mining and metal engineers, printers, and inventors learned new techniques and debated policy through the pages of specialized publications,” explains journalism historian William Huntzicker.\textsuperscript{306} And when President Jackson’s administration abolished the national banking system, banks created their own trade publications for a place to discuss business specific issues among banking professionals.\textsuperscript{307}

The Antebellum era’s most controversial specialty paper was the abolition press. Some publications advocated for emancipation while others favored repatriating slaves to Africa. Antislavery papers, according to Mott, “were both the cause and effect of the mounting feeling against the ‘peculiar institution’ of the South.”\textsuperscript{308} William Lloyd Garrison’s Boston based \textit{Liberator} was arguably the leader among these newspapers that began in 1831, and was published in one form or another through the Civil War.

The rise of scientific knowledge also prompted a number trade journals dedicated to scientific inquiry and expertise, notably that began publishing in 1845. The scientific press, like many other specialty publications, had a common goal to influence public policy. According to Huntzicker, periodicals such as \textit{Scientific American} “borrow[ed] from the tradition of the partisan press newspaper” and targeted audiences from farmers to bankers, carrying a tone of self-improvement and national expansion in the pages of

\textsuperscript{305} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{306} Huntzicker, \textit{The Popular Press, 1833-1865}, 57.
\textsuperscript{307} Ibid., 56-57.
\textsuperscript{308} Mott, \textit{American Journalism, a History: 1690-1960}, 322.
their papers. As this dissertation will reveal in later chapters, many specialty publications would bring Frank Leslie’s pictorial reporting on the swill milk industry to a scientifically minded audience and added to the discourse about the dangerous properties of milk from swill-fed cattle.

Undoubtedly, when Frank Leslie arrived in the United States in 1848, there was a burgeoning publishing industry where Leslie was able to pursue his dream of bringing a news-driven, illustrated publication to the marketplace. Looking back at this wide and diverse publishing culture, it is a wonder that so many newspapers and periodicals could thrive. Many failed, of course, but the ones that endured offered something that readers wanted and returned to for news and information to help guide their lives. Frank Leslie’s answer to the time-honored question of attracting and retaining customers was through pictorial reporting. Having made his mark as a skilled illustrator in his native England, Leslie came to the United States to fulfill his dream of publishing a newspaper that told the news in picture.

*News for All: The Democratization of Information*

The culture of newspaper reading that expanded beyond the wealthy, elite populations in the first half of the nineteenth century is often tied to the cultural phenomenon labeled “Jacksonian” democracy. Political authority began to shift from

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310 As noted earlier, the distinction between newspapers and magazines were less than they are today. See Huntzicker, *The Popular Press, 1833-1865*, 53.
311 Jacksonian democracy is generally understood as a political shift that occurred during the presidency of Andrew Jackson. Traditional scholarship on the subject positions this period in history as “opening up” the political system to a larger population, thus better satisfying the mission of democracy. The office of the
clergy, so-called experts, and academia to the “common” man. Thanks in part to the industrial revolution, manufacturing changes not only encouraged mechanized development, it also changed the way people viewed themselves in the world. Dicken-Garcia writes, “[U]rban growth changed relationships and affected people’s thinking about politics and society; Jacksonian Democracy changed people’s view about their role in government.”

Newspapers and other print materials reflected a more “inclusive” ethos in their turn away from partisan politics towards information-based reporting. The larger culture reflected this change as well. Literature such as Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman celebrated common, ordinary places that the average person could relate to (and, incidentally, was published the same year that Leslie started his illustrated newspaper). A new genre of “how-to” manuals about new industrial machines took the mystery out of the process of production and empowered non-experts to learn more about how things worked. The dominant political ideology, which emphasized Protestant morals and stressed the importance of hard work to achieve upward class mobility, was now sharing a space where news and information were empowering persons on an individual level.

From this, civic culture was emerging that valued and encouraged the spread of

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president is thought to have gained more prestige, while congressional members became less powerful. Voting rights were opened up so non-land owning white men. A contrasting point of view that argues otherwise, noting, for example, that slavery was still a strong, powerful institution, and enfranchisement was limited to white men, excluding women and people of color.

313 Dicken-Garcia, Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth-Century America., 41.
knowledge and provided non-elites with knowledge and problem-solving skills. Citizens were absorbing many forms of print beyond newspapers, including calling cards, advertisements, packaging labels, and timetables for the railroad. Historian Neil Harris calls this an “operational aesthetic,” and this aesthetic guided popular tastes in nineteenth-century America.

Recent scholarship by literary journalism historian Tom Connery posits observable changes in nineteenth-century journalism include a movement towards realistic content and a shift away from the “extraordinary and lofty.” Leslie’s newspaper, and his investigation of the swill milk industry, fits into what Connery calls a “paradigm of actuality.” “For journalism,” Connery writes, “this paradigm of actuality essentially involved documenting, in nonfiction and fiction, in drawings and photographs, the perceived reality.” The illustrations Leslie provided to his readers emphasized a realism previously unseen on such a scale in the press. The authenticity of the images is irrelevant; what is relevant is the realistic presentation of these people, places and animals. Put another way, it is the iconic nature of these images, to use the language of semiotics that situates Leslie’s illustrations in this “paradigm of actuality” in that was a growing commodity in journalism.

As discussed earlier, one popular reform movement in the mid-nineteenth century included educational efforts that led to increased literacy rates among the working and

\[315\] Christine Pawley, Reading on the Middle Border: The Culture of Print in Late Nineteenth-Century Osage, Iowa (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 1.

\[316\] Connery, Journalism and Realism: Rendering American Life, 7.
middle classes. But scholars have argued that the introduction of illustrations in newspapers and periodicals also informed a new kind of literacy and expanded the cultural experience of the non-elite classes. For example, Patricia Andersen examines Britain’s early printed image culture in *The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture 1790-1860* and provides some valuable ideas that inform this study of the U.S. illustrated press. She maintains that picture books were able to transcend classes, reaching a larger audience than any other medium has in the past. Many of the *FLIN* illustrations under study claim to be representation of reality, and the authors maintain the creations are as authentic as they can be. In journalism circles, the discussion of images and authenticity is reserved for the rise of photography, but the theories posited in early photojournalism can be, and should be, also applied to early news illustrations.

Joshua Brown cautions against understanding literacy in America as the “great equalizer” among the classes: “The creation of the reading public has been equated by some historians with the defining of shared values in the formation of a new middle class, a perspective that overlooks how such values changed meaning as they crossed class boundaries.” In addition, literacy, as Michael Schudson suggests, should not be used as a dominant indicator for the rise of the popular press. Rather, economic and political

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318 In H. Bonnie Brennen and Hanno Hardt, *Picturing the Past: Media, History, and Photography* (University of Illinois Press, 1999), they discuss the influence of documentary style photography in the early 20th century, and much of what they talk about seems applicable to the early illustrated press, especially talk about early claims of representing “reality.”
factors must also be considered. Schudson says a better explanation for the rise of literacy happens when persons in a culture recognize themselves as historical actors.  

The idea that literacy rises alongside historical consciousness corresponds with Leslie’s proclamations in his newspaper that he was documenting history as much as reporting the news. This is where pictorial reporting could make an impact. Indexical images, such as the realistic drawing found in Leslie’s, “share a physical connection to the object or event to which it refers.” Leslie’s pictorial newspaper, of course, could partly overcome literacy challenges with his pictorial content that visually resembled reality because it would not require one to be able to read words in order to understand the meaning. Who exactly was reading Leslie’s is also difficult to discern concretely, and Brown offers an economic interpretation: at six cents a copy, Leslie’s “would severely tax the budgets of many working-class households,” but nonetheless, evidence exists that the paper had a wide readership. While acknowledging that ascertaining readership is problematic, Brown says that copies of Leslie’s “clearly circulated among populations, especially in the unions, associations, and organizations,” especially those organizations that subscribed to his weekly newspaper.

Labeling literacy a “tricky concept,” David M. Henkin, author of City Reading: Written Words an Public Spaces in Antebellum New York, warns that “we (as scholars)

320 Schudson, Discovering the News, 36-38.
322 Brown, Beyond the Lines, 44-45.
know little about the diffusion of reading skills over the centuries." While some studies, according to Henkin, place illiteracy, especially in the northern United States, as low as 4 percent, there is no data that can help historians determine, for example, “how many people could make sense of the number 5 on a banknote [or] a name on a street sign.” Furthermore, using historical records that measure how many people own books, for example, “tells us very little about how and why people read, how much they read, and how necessary or useful reading was for their everyday lives.” Evidence of literacy can be drawn from the sheer number of texts in the form of street signs, advertising, banknotes, and of course, the number of cheap papers printed in the city. And, as this research will show, evidence exists that Leslie’s was responsible for spreading the news about New York’s swill milk problem in the city and across the country, especially in the North.

**Early Visual Culture**

Benjamin Franklin’s colonial newspaper, the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, published what historians credit as the first political cartoon, titled “Join, or Die” (Figure 3-1). The cartoon depicts a snake chopped into sections that each represented a British colony (New York, Virginia, etc.). At the time of the publication in 1754, Franklin was using the severed snake as a metaphor for a call to action. It is a simple drawing that lacks

324 Ibid., 21. This is data from 1840, almost 20 years before Leslie’s exposé.
325 Ibid.
326 The snake was separated into 8 pieces, one piece represented more than one colony was labeled “NE” presumably standing for New England.
detail, but the likeness similar enough to an actual snake that a viewer can grasp what the sketch represents. In some respects, the meaning is lost to history. Some speculate that the cartoon refers to the legend of a severed snake that could be joined back together if it was done before nightfall. This example of one of the first political cartoons is a powerful reminder of how images can communicate a great deal of information in a small space — and also how meaning is wedded tightly to history.

Figure 3-1

I mention the “Join, or Die” cartoon to place Leslie’s pictorial news reporting into perspective, as Franklin’s cartoon appeared roughly 100 years before Leslie started his illustrated newspaper in the United States. The nineteenth century witnessed a sharp rise in visual culture; new illustrations and political cartoons were growing more sophisticated and becoming available to a wider audience of newspaper readers. The average New Yorker was likely bombarded on day-to-day basis with many forms of print and visual culture, as industrialized printing marshaled quite an assemblage of printed
The number of printed materials made “Manhattan an ink-drenched town,” say Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, co-authors of *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*. From street signs, billboards, newspaper stands, calling cards, handbills and pamphlets, the urban dweller would have been familiar with many forms of print and visual culture. Daily interactions could include seeing numerous advertisements, reading packaging labels, and studying timetables for the railroad. Referring to the visual landscape as a “civic text,” *Gotham* authors quote John F. Watson’s description of New York City in 1846: “New York is distinguished for its display in the way of signs… every device and expense is resorted to, to make them attractive.” Some handbills were produced to resemble paper money.

In public places and in printed materials alike, likenesses of politicians and dignitaries in portraiture, landscapes, religious iconography, scenes of war and foreign locations emphasizing the unusual were common and popular. While the tradition of realism in art certainly portrayed the seedier and more average sides of life, this imagery was not typically found in the newspapers. Those outside of the privileged classes would not typically see images in newspapers and magazines that reflected the circumstances of their lives. What was so powerful about Frank Leslie’s work is the fact that he and his staff presented illustrations as news covering more common, topical imagery of everyday life.

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328 Ibid.
329 Pawley, *Reading on the Middle Border: the Culture of Print in Late Nineteenth-Century Osage, Iowa, 1850-1900*, 1
events. These were illustrations that the poor, working- and middle-class citizens could likely relate to and see themselves reflected back.\textsuperscript{331}

Unlike today, pictorial reporting was not a routine part of communicating news in nineteenth-century newspapers. Newspaper publishers in the United States began to use illustrations to tell the news in the 1830s, but the process was costly and time-consuming. As a result, illustrations appeared infrequently. The practice was virtually abandoned by the late 1840s because of technological challenges and resource limitations.\textsuperscript{332} However, newspaper editors continued to rely on illustration for important events. A famous example is Andrew Jackson’s funeral procession, the subject of the first full-page illustration to appear in an American newspaper, published on June 28, 1845 in Bennett’s New York \textit{Herald}.\textsuperscript{333}

Another issue that hindered early efforts to visualize the news was a lack of skilled illustrators.\textsuperscript{334} The “reporter-artist” was a new role in the field of journalism, and it took time to train and cultivate good reporters. But once illustrated reporters began working, they were influential by reproducing aspects of city life previously unseen. Neil Harris writes, “The new artist-specialist, each associated with a personal style and a category of subject material, might well have been making New York, in William Hobb’s phrase, ‘the world’s bohemia of illustration’ and American illustrators the envy of their

\textsuperscript{331} Przybyski, ed. \textit{The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader}.
\textsuperscript{332} Brown, \textit{Beyond the Lines}, 13-14.
\textsuperscript{334} Gambee.
European counterparts." Harris concludes that all of these forms of pictures — illustrations in books and newspapers, comics, the rise of the amateur photographer, and eventually motion pictures — were subverting and challenged established standards of the written word.

The forerunners to the era’s pictorial illustrators were artists hired by merchants and royalty to document foreign lands, military campaigns and cultures, among others. Paul Hogarth documents one early Irish artist, John White, working for merchants as early as the sixteenth century. There is evidence of artists drawing in the spirit or recording history, such as Czech artist Wencelaus Hollar who worked in England and Jacques Callot. Callot is known for his worked as reporter-artists, drawing fanciful and humorous scene of the Renaissance "laced with bitterness and irony."

Until illustrated media found their way into printed albums and later the illustrated press, church decor would have been where the average person would have experienced documentary-style art. While there were colonial and early publishers in the United States, we know that much of the printed material consumed in the United States was imported from overseas. Although American newspapers were certainly “home grown,” literature was predominately imported from England during this time.

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335 Harris, “Pictorial Perils,” 348.
336 Ibid.
338 Ibid., 8-9.
339 Ibid.
Scholarship supports the notion that the Antebellum pictorial press in the U.S. influenced their earlier European predecessors. Britain published the first widely circulated illustrated paper in “Western” culture that emphasized visual reporting. The earliest effort to produce a periodical dedicated to news illustrations is credited to a London journal titled *Penny Magazine* in 1832. Others followed, including a comedic publication called *Punch* in 1841, characterized by S.N.D. North as, “a periodical based upon the idea that a picture is the natural and realistic component of linguistic wit and humor.” The illustrated press would find lasting success in England by way of the *Illustrated London News*. The paper began in May of 1842 when “the printed image was thought to wield much power over those who gaze it attracted.” The paper was conceived as a tool to “teach” sophistication through highfalutin content to England’s citizens, reflecting the Victorian culture of the day.

Printing methods were perfected early by Japanese artists and influenced western European artists and later American artists. Those who became to be known as “Special Artists” were hired to sketch “on-the-spot” illustrations of news and draw other illustrations for pictorial content. The artist-as-reporter was a skilled worker in engraving, and they were hard to find in the early days of the illustrated press. One source speculates

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342 Ibid.
343 Park, David. 289.
that there may have been some female engravers until the financial crisis of 1857 that
“virtually wiped [them] out.”

A small number of dissertations, journal articles and book chapters examine the
illustrated press in the nineteenth century. The most thorough work to date is Joshua
Brown’s *Beyond The Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded
Age America*. Brown’s cultural history of pictorial reporting uses *Frank Leslie’s
Illustrated Newspaper* as a lens into life in the “Golden Age” — the period after the Civil
War in the United States through the end of the nineteenth century. His examination of
*Leslie’s* places the editor and his publishing empire within the transformation of the
marketplace and the rise of the middle class consumer in America. It is a story about
using visual culture as a tool to serve democracy and to overcome the social and cultural
barriers that divide the classes. Brown succinctly articulates the social, technical and
cultural events that led to changes in the visual culture by the mid-century:

> The pace was at first tentative, but by the mid-nineteenth century the popular pictorial landscape had changed utterly. Nowhere was this more evident than in the proliferation of topical imagery published in the nineteenth-century weekly illustrated press… Emerging out of the transformation in time and space created in the wake of the railroad and telegraph, this particular print revolution disseminated...

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news, cartoon, scientific, cultural, aesthetic, fashion and
other forms of visual information to a previously picture-
starved public across the USA and at a previously
unimaginable speed (often within days of events).\textsuperscript{348}

Scholarship about the nineteenth-century press cites great cultural and
institutional change in the newspaper industry and society at large. Political, social and
economic changes also influenced artists' documentation of everyday life and customs.
The rise of scientific inquiry and an interest in the natural world also influenced what
artists drew.\textsuperscript{349} These influences shifted the form of representation from the fantastic and
comical towards attempts to represent reality in an objective and more literal way.
Renditions of the new industrial landscape were drawn, such as canals, railways, bridges
and foundries in Western Europe.\textsuperscript{350}

Pictorial content in illustrated periodicals such as \textit{Leslie’s} are typically
categorized as either illustrations or cartoons. One scholar defines illustrations as
“pictorial representations of news events by an artist/reporter at the scene” and cartoons
as “poignant commentary on current events of the day.”\textsuperscript{351} Barnhurst and Nerone further
categorize the types of news illustrations in \textit{The Form of News}.\textsuperscript{352} Their study samples a
broad period of illustrated history for approximately a 40-year period. In contrast, this
research examines all illustrations associated with the swill milk scandal to uncover what
trends emerge. With more than 70 illustrations pertaining to swill milk during the

\textsuperscript{349} Hogarth, \textit{The Artist as Reporter}, 8.
\textsuperscript{350} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{351} Martin Kuhn, “Drawing Civil War Soldiers.” \textit{Journalism History}. Summer 2006. 32:3, 98.
\textsuperscript{352} Barnhurst and Nerone, \textit{The Form of News}. 119.
summer months of 1858, a closer reading of illustrations associated with a single event will reveal new and previously undiscovered trends in the realm of visual reporting in the mid-nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, those who study the illustrated press during the peak of its success pay more attention to political cartooning than to the illustrated content that was published as pictorial news reporting. The cartoons of this period are the forerunners of modern political cartooning that can still be seen on newspaper editorial pages today. Political cartoonist Thomas Nast is arguably the most well known artist-reporter of the nineteenth century. His cartoon campaign against the corrupt post-Civil War Tweed Ring in New York City is recognized for its political satire and for helping to root out corrupt city officials. Although it is impossible to know how readers “read” these illustrations, some cartoons likely resembled “real” events, then as now, albeit exaggerated for the purposes of political satire. While the project will not focus on political cartooning from this era, it will be important to clearly identify illustrations conveying a pictorial representation of a news event.

Conclusion

The use of visual images used by Frank Leslie and others brought about new ways of organizing, observing, reproducing and transmitting news and information in mid

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353 For example, in Chris Lamb, Drawn to Extremes: The Use and Abuse of Editorial Cartoons (Columbia University Press, 2004), he calls Nast “America’s first great cartoonist,” 64.
354 For an example, see “A Revolution in National Life” in The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media.
nineteenth-century America.\textsuperscript{355} These illustrations are rich with historical and cultural information that too often are overlooked. As Michael Wilson explains, the expansion of capitalism, urbanization and changing gender roles are examples of the kinds of knowledge that can be untangled from these illustrations.\textsuperscript{356} But Wilson says that all too often, historical uses of illustrations and other images are used more as “decorative” to show the “flavor” of the period under study. The images themselves are not analyzed for their own sake or in relation to the printed text, and often, they are not contextualized.\textsuperscript{357}

Why are there so few studies of the pictorial press in mid-century America?
Perhaps this is due to the relatively short amount of time that the illustrated press existed before technology allowed for the reproduction of photographs in the newspaper. It has also been posited that historians prefer texts to images as sites of inquiry. Or the lack of interest could lie in the fact that, when images closely represent reality, the meaning seems obvious and therefore does not necessary to interrogate further? Regardless of the reasons, the illustrated newspaper is an area in much need of more scholarly inquiry.

The next chapter of this dissertation embarks on the visual analysis of news illustrations about swill milk in \textit{Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper}. The pictorial news images are examined for their own meaning-making qualities, and not simply as supplemental to the written word. I use the visual analysis methods described in Chapter

\textsuperscript{355} John Tagg in \textit{The Burdon of Representation: Essays of Photography and Histories} includes a series of essays about the rise of the photographic image in the nineteenth century, which is instructive to this dissertation concerned with illustrations as news in the pictorial press.
\textsuperscript{357} ibid, 30.
One to reveal the visual narratives made available in the illustrated reporting about the swill milk’s negative impact on public health. Leslie persistently published pictorial content about the swill milk business during the spring and summer of 1858. Chapter Four will help explain why the graphic, realistic illustrations in Leslie’s resonated with the public so much more than words had in the past about the problem of swill milk. The analysis should provide sufficient evidence regarding why his illustrations agitated for social change when written accounts in previous articles and books did little to raise the outrage and political attention aimed at taking down the swill milk trade.
Chapter Four: “Ours has been no pleasing task!”: Visual Analysis of Frank Leslie’s Pictorial Campaign Against the Swill Milk Industry

The same result will crown our exposure of the swill milk abomination; our pictures bring home to the mind the appalling facts, when the eloquence of Daniel Webster would fail. In such cases the pencil and the pen are irresistible.

— Excerpt from Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper May 29, 1858

This quote is from an article referencing an 1842 incident in England that links the “potency of pictorial logic” to successfully persuading the kingdom’s ruling class to address the practice of “female and child labor” in the coal mines of Barnsley. Frank Leslie used this example to tout his own pictorial achievement — framing the swill milk industry as a horrible business that was killing the city’s children. By the end of May 1858, Leslie’s news illustrations were arguably the “talk of the town.” It was the fourth consecutive week where pictures representing the swill milk business appeared on the cover of the weekly illustrated newspaper.

Frank Leslie provided the public with provocative and detailed drawing that depicted realistic-looking images of the problem associated with the swill milk industry. Earlier efforts in the century led by Dr. Augustus Gardner from the New York Academy of Medicine ultimately failed to persuade the Academy or public officials to take action on studies that claimed swill milk had little nutritional value. Describing the substance as having “positively noxious properties,” histories of New York’s public health efforts
concede that the swill milk business was too big and too powerful to be regulated. Multiple archival searches on the business of milk and swill milk reveal little news coverage on the topic before Leslie’s pictorial reportage, and almost no stories about swill milk were found outside of the New York City area.

This chapter presents an analysis of the illustrations Frank Leslie used to create a visual narrative about the swill milk crisis for his readers. The central question in this chapter asks how the illustrations in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* constructed the story about the “swill milk industry” to the public. Leslie published realistic-looking images that were said to be drawn “on the spot” by his staff of reporter-artists. Scientific drawings and information graphics were also published in a way to support the visual evidence drawn from first-hand accounts. Leslie’s illustrations were presented to readers as direct representations of eyewitness observations; the text in the newspaper went to great lengths to explain to readers that the reporter-artist was “on-the-spot,” implying that these illustrations were factual, truthful and representative of reality.

On the surface, these illustrations present a grim picture of the swill milk trade. While Leslie’s efforts were aimed at exposing the evils of the swill milk trade, a deeper analysis of these images present the paradoxes of life in mid-nineteenth century America. On one hand, Leslie’s work can be likened to the broader culture of reform that sought to improve the city — especially the circumstances of immigrants, children and the poor — that later came of age during the progressive movements at the century’s end. This period

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also echoes another phenomenon more often associated with late nineteenth-century journalism: reporting on “sensational” matters to sell newspapers. Sensationalism in the news was certainly nothing new — the notorious “moon hoax” stories published in the New York Sun claiming evidence of life on Mars precedes Leslie’s swill milk expose by over 20 years. Remarking on the newspaper industry’s new way of increasing circulation, Edgar Alan Poe used the term “sensation” to describe the phenomenon of inventing the news rather than gathering it. While the term “sensationalism” is often reserved for the Hearst and Pulitzer circulation wars in the 1890s, Leslie clearly understood that the use of sensational elements in the swill milk story would captivate readers, and in so doing, sold a lot of newspapers.

While Leslie’s illustrations possessed an element of sensationalism, they also reflect the larger culture of reform in mid-nineteenth century America. As discussed in Chapter 2, it is apparent that Leslie’s exposé was guided by the reform efforts of Robert M. Hartley. Hartley, a scientist, wrote about the dangerous properties of swill milk and linked the problem of swill milk with the larger sanitary reform movement. As one of the first Americans to write about the pitfalls of swill-fed cattle in An Historical, Scientific and Practical Essay on Milk as an Article of Human Sustenance in 1842, Hartley addressed the problem of alcohol abuse and linked it to swill milk dairies. Because dairy

359 This series ran during the summer of 1835.
360 Brown, Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America.: 12
362 See Chapter 2 for more detail about social reform movements and their relationship to efforts to abolish swill milk.
cows relied primarily on the byproduct of alcohol for their daily sustenance, Hartley rightly associated the alcohol and swill milk industries. In the years following his book’s publication, the city of New York more than doubled in population, making swill milk a vital business to meet the demand for milk in the city and its suburbs. And while Hartley was a scientist, not all persons were worthy of charity in his approach to improve society. Piety, temperance, and Protestantism equaled the “trifecta” of worthiness for charitable receiving, leaving the Irish Catholics to a less-worthy position. Groups like the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP) would have similar endeavors to help the poor and also had pause when helping certain populations in the city. Hartley, like many of his contemporaries, felt that “poverty bespoke depravity,” and many of the city’s large Irish Catholics were among the most destitute.

In Leslie’s swill milk exposé, the poor, Irish population in New York was portrayed as villains. The English-born Frank Leslie would have grown up in a culture that had little respect for the Irish, especially those with a working-class pedigree. At 25% of New York’s population, Irish persons filled the city, and took jobs at the swill milk stables. The distillery and dairy workers, often referred to as “milk maids,” are depicted as, and named as, Irish. They are portrayed in text and pictures as dirty, unkempt, indifferent to their working conditions, and cruel to the animals in their care. So, while Leslie was touting his achievements in the pages of his newspaper for exposing

363 Duffy, A History of Public Health in New York City, 428.
366 Ibid., 620.
the swill milk trade for all of the evil that it was, he also employed the use of appalling stereotypes of working-class Irish to help sell his story to the larger population.

Notwithstanding the sensational and racist tactics Leslie used to communicate the swill milk story, Frank Leslie can be credited for adding a visual element to a serious public health issue that was previously communicated only in writing. Historian Joshua Brown says that the swill milk crisis in New York “had long been the target of ineffective newspaper criticism and complaint of sanitary reformers,” and Leslie’s campaign “demonstrated the effectiveness of images in stimulating public outrage and reform.”

This research revealed a handful of newspaper stories about swill milk that reported on complaints filed by citizens against the stables as public nuisances as well as fraudulent sale of swill milk that was passed off as “pure, country milk.” For example, Horace Greeley’s Tribune reported in 1850 on a court case regarding a dispute of the price of milk sold to the proprietor of the Irving House. The series of article tells the account of the fraudulent sale of milk. The defendant, Daniel D. Howard of the Irving House, was accused of not paying the agreed-upon amount for the milk supplied by Edward Longhman. Howard defense was based on the claim that the milk was not from country cows, but rather distillery-kept cows; he went further to say that the plaintiff should pay damages for supplying a product “deleterious to health.” A familiar figure in the battle against swill milk, Dr. A.K. Gardner, testified on behalf of the defense, describing in detail the crowded condition of the stables. The article reported Gardner’s description of

the stables: “There are in these stables about 1,000 cows, owned by different individuals… they are fastened by the head: have no bed but lay on the hard floor, which is always very wet, the stable excessively hot in Summer and exposed in Winter.” In a follow-up article about this court case, the Herald, reported that the court thanked Mr. Howard for altering the community of the “great fraud” of swill milk, saying that, “it is a matter highly important to the public health, and deserves the serious consideration of the authorities.” Despite the court’s recognition of the damming testimony from Dr. Gardner “as to distillery milk being unhealthy,” this case was about money. It was a settlement about a business transaction, not about changing the swill milk business.

The visual evidence in Leslie’s of the swill milk business in New York City and Brooklyn present a few central themes, or dominate narratives. 1) If they aren’t drawn as dead, the cows are all well on their way; they are miserable “beasts,” diseased and malnourished. 2) The men involved in the day-to-day operations of the swill milk distillery stables abuse the animals and are illustrated as recklessly dirty, sub-human Irishmen. The contractors who deliver the milk via milk wagons share similar qualities as the stable workers. 3) Leslie’s artist-reporters were often portrayed as dignified members of society who placed themselves in great danger as they collected their evidence against the swill milk business. 4) Early forms of Information Graphics and illustrated scientific evidence became supporting evidence to strengthen the newspaper’s “on the spot” pictorial reporting.

The following analysis of these illustrations focuses on the content published during the summer and fall of 1858. When applicable, I also use the written content in the newspaper (news articles, etc.) when it helped to contextualize the illustrations. Each illustration selected was interpreted denotatively and connotatively. This analysis helped determine which messages were available and communicated to a contemporary reader. All of the illustrations analyzed had an accompanying caption/cutline that guided an 1858 reader to better understand the illustration. Often, the cutline explained the origin of the engraving — if it was from an original sketch, or recreated from a photograph, for example. Also, many cutlines included a page number that referred the reader to more information or an accompanying article. Journalism historians Barnhurst and Nerone call this additional text “amplification.” This amplification often pointed out specific details in the image, thereby likely influencing the meaning of the illustration. Combining these visual representations and text illuminate the totality of meaning that Leslie wanted to provide to his readers. In other words, the text in Leslie’s functioned to further construct meaning for the newspaper consumer.

On the surface, many of Leslie’s images offer graphic details of the wretched conditions in the distillery stables where thousands of cows were packed into areas designed for only a few hundred to make a case for abolishing the swill milk stables altogether in the city. By going beyond the manifest content in these illustrations, my analysis offers a deeper interpretation of the illustrations, defining familiar tropes, either

370 See theory and methods explicated in Chapter One for further detail.
371 Most illustrations from the swill milk series were sketched from eye-witness accounts.
visual or textual, that elevate meaning to a higher order: to a level of “myth.” I use myth as defined by Roland Barthes, which I discuss in Chapter One. The illustrations examined convey meaning beyond what is merely observable on the page, and what Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall might argue: it is only at this level of “myth” that meaning is truly communicated.

*Leslie Sets the Stage: “No Pleasing Task”*

While Frank Leslie often wrote that he was only motivated by his duty as a journalist to bring the news of the “subtle poison” carried by swill milk, some of his actions might suggest otherwise. Perhaps he learned the finer points of self-promotion while employed by P. T. Barnum during his first year in the United States, having learned “a penchant for overstatement” from the infamous showman and promoter.372 On May 3, 1858, Leslie purchased advertising space on page 8 of the New York Herald.373 On a page filled with a variety of information, such as letters to the editor of the Herald and news from the Louisville Courier about a man suspiciously acquitted of murder charges, a serious of ads and a letter from Frank Leslie appeared in the bottom, right corner. The content of his advertisement consisted of a series of six ads in a row that all read the same thing: “Exposure of the Swill milk Business—Read Frank Leslie’s letter to the public in this paper.” Below, in what was likely more purchased ad space, was a letter that Frank Leslie wrote as a direct appeal to the reader. He asked, “Are you aware what kind of milk you are drinking? Are you aware that over seven thousand children die every year in New

372 Huntzicker, "Frank Leslie," 212.
373 A similar advertisement appeared in the Herald on May 4, 1858.
York and Brooklyn from drinking swill milk?” The letter/ad continued to say that his newspaper was taking on the task to “awaken you to the horrible extent of your delusion, and awaken you to the danger you and your infants hereby incur by partaking of the abomination, distillery swill milk.” Leslie referred to swill milk as both “subtle poison” and “liquid poison” in the letter, and explained that he was doing this only to benefit his fellow citizens, implying that he was providing a public service: “It is no pleasing task,” Leslie explained, saying his swill milk investigation was conducted “out of a sense of duty.” He described the “milk maids” with “large beards and of excessive dirt,” and painted a sympathetic portrayal of one of his reporter-artists who was attacked by these unclean “milk maids.” In order to “break up this enormous evil,” and “this unholy traffic,” Leslie explained that through pen and pencil, he would name names of swill milk providers, and offer statistics of the trade and the mortality rates: “The cows, their diseases, their fearful suffering from unwholesome food and their constant confinement, which only leads to their death.” He accused the Board of Health and the municipality of being “willfully blind.” In this letter to the public, Leslie is drawing on their moral sensibilities of the public by using words like “evil” and “unholy.” His claim that 7,000 infant deaths a year in a city of approximately 800,000 were tied to swill milk must have also given many readers pause. The cows, living in crowded and unclean conditions, were malnourished on a diet of only distillery slop — the substance dubbed “swill milk.” It was thought that these cows were diseased with a contagion unique to animals fed only distillery swill.
The contemporary literary world at the time of the swill milk reports would have been filled with examples of sensational writing that likely influenced Leslie’s own work. According to Thomas Connery, George G. Foster’s *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches*, is “representative of the cultural shift to depict the actual.” Quoting Stuart M. Blumin, Connery explains that contemporary literary writers such as Whitman and Foster were, “explaining the new metropolis to a society that was in so many ways affected by its development.”374 So in describing the swill milk business as “evil” and the milk as “liquid poison,” Leslie’s readers would have been familiar with the hyperbolic writing. Leslie would advance this sensational tone by presenting realistic-looking illustrations that told the story about the seamy side of the swill milk industry that would bring a new and more potent message about swill milk to his readers.

In the spirit of advertising and self-promotion, Leslie chose to omit any deference to those who had tried and failed to fight the swill milk industry before him: “I fight single-handed against a wealthy and powerful monopoly.” And, while he asked for public cooperation in his efforts, he must not have been speaking to those whom he described as “indifferent” to the death of their children who would not “rouse from their lethargy to drive the pestilent monster from their midst.” While we cannot be certain, it seems that he

is talking only to a certain segment of the population — to those who read the Herald — about helping persons who are beyond helping themselves.375

Regular readers of Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper would have expected to see his front pages featuring portraits, landscape pictures, or technological marvels, such as a new steam ship. For example, the January 16, 1858, issue portrayed Carl Formes, the “Basso Profundo” of the Academy of Music in action with his maestro’s wand. Political figures, both foreign and domestic, were also regularly featured, as exemplified by the April 3, 1858, cover portraying national congressmen. The March 20, 1858, edition presented the likeness of Mohamed Pasha, Rear-Admiral of the Turkish Navy on the front cover.376 But the front page of the May 8th edition of Leslie’s should have arrested the sensibility of any viewer, literate or otherwise.

The headline, “Special Notice. Startling Exposure of the Milk Trade of New York and Brooklyn,” would signal to readers that this would be no ordinary issue of Leslie’s, as the first paragraph explained:

In presenting to our readers the sickening details connected with the distillery milk manufacture which prevails to an alarming rate both in New York and Brooklyn, we are animated solely by a desire to benefit our fellow-citizens, to expose the shameless frauds which are every day perpetrated under the eyes and with the full cognizance of the public authorities, and the break up of a system which,

375 New York Herald, Wednesday, May 05, 1858. Also, on May 6 Leslie runs another advertisement for his swill milk expose that reads, “Every Wife and Mother In New York And Brooklyn should read the startling exposure of the swill milk they use, in Frank Leslie’s paper this day.” New York Herald, Thursday, May 06, 1858. This same letter from Leslie to the public appears in the New York Times on May 7, 1858.
376 March 20, 1858.
by the wholesale distribution of liquid poison, is
decimating our population, bringing death into a thousand
homes, and demoralizing the general health of the city.

To assure his readers that these claims were authentic, Leslie described what he
and his team of investigators and artist reporters had been doing to bring this story to the
public’s eye:

In order to develop the subject fully, we shall give pen or pencil
illustration of—
Every establishment where distillery milk is manufactured;
The routes of all the distillery milk carts;
The number of every house to which they supply milk
The location and number of depots which dispense this milk as ‘Pure
Country Milk;’
The names of the owners of the cows;
The cows, their diseases, their fearful suffering from unwholesome food
and their constant confinement, which only ends in their death;
Statistics of the trade
Statistics of the mortality among infants attributed by the faculty to the use
of distillery or swill milk;
The names and false inscriptions upon the carts which carry the swill milk
about the city, and such other points as may arise in course of our minute
investigation.

In an introductory article, Leslie explained that he and his staff would rather not
report on such an unseemly topic, “but a sense of public duty and the powerful level of
faithful and accurate illustrations taken on these leper spots, which will tell the horrible truths more vividly than any pen could picture.” The text further described that swill milk stables as “distemper-breeding” and “loathsome pest-houses” that exuded “sickening stenches.” The milk produced by the cows was referred to as a “filthy liquid.” Art the article explained, the artist-reporters endured a tremendous amount of agony, and their work was completed “with much personal inconvenience,” and were assaulted by the “swill milkmen” when it was realized that the reporters were sketching the stables. Leslie’s sarcastic comment — that the milkmen’s, “disinclination to have their low lazars truly depicted” — implied their guilt.377

In the weeks to come, Leslie dedicated much illustrated space to the swill milk industry. Each of the next four issues featured an illustration related to the swill milk business prominently on the front cover. News illustrations about swill milk would appear in his publication through the middle of July, and editorial cartoons followed when the municipality was accused of a cover up in its official city investigation of swill milk as a public health issue. Readers were told that much time and money was dedicated to the investigation in order to perform their civic obligation thoroughly: “we will exhaust the subject in this and succeeding numbers [issues], by an array of facts and horrible details which will, we hope, result in some public action that will break up this enormous evil, root it out from our city, and supply a substitute for this dangerous, poisonous liquid, that will be at once nutritious and wholesome.” In a direct appeal to his

377 Leslie’s May 8, 1858, p. 353.
readers, Leslie asked for their help: “We ask all who are familiar with the subject to send us facts within their knowledge, and aid us to abate the sickening nuisance.”

**The Exposure of the Swill Milk Trade: Leslie Opens his Pictorial Exposé**

The May 8, 1858, edition of *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Paper* was the usual 16-paged publication, but the engraving on the front cover portrayed a graphic and shocking scene of death (Figure 4-1).

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378 Ibid., 354.
Figure 4-1
The illustration showed, unambiguously, a dead cow being dragged with a rope around its neck by two men out of a doorway. The cow’s head and neck show contortion, and it is clear that the animal is dead. The cow’s tongue hangs out of its mouth as another visual clue that cow is no longer alive. The implied movement in this illustration is conveyed by the depiction of two men tugging on the rope around the cow’s neck. The pulling appears to be a heavy, laborious job. Nearby, two other men look on, one with his hands in his pockets and a pipe in his mouth and the other leaning in the doorway. None of the expressions on the men’s faces indicates anything unusual. The image is drawn in such a fashion to compel a viewer to focus on the dead cow—the animal is the largest object in the illustration. The background roughly portrays what looks like a brick building, and one can mentally complete the idea that that dead cow is being pulled out of a building even though the entire building is not pictured. The foreground appears to be a puddle of water with some garbage or mud protruding, which makes the area look even more unkempt. This front-page illustration is one of 10 such illustrations in the issue.

This three quarter-page news illustration is one example of many that were drawn “on the stop” and eye-witnessed by Leslie’s reporters and investigators. Albert Berghaus, one of Frank Leslie’s reporter-artists during this period, likely drew this sketch. These on-the-stop, firsthand, drawings posses a “moment-in-time” quality. They represent unique events that imply a reporter-artist was an eyewitness to what was happening. Unlike someone sitting for a portrait, these firsthand illustrations could have easily been

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Connery, *Journalism and Realism: Rendering American Life*. Berghaus testifies in front of the Board of Health’s “Swill Milk Committee” with is further evidence that he was the reporter-artist.
drawn without the subjects of the image knowing he or she was being sketched. If we believe Leslie, his artist-reporters were able to make close observations of what was happening in the stables undetected, for the most part, and were able to gather enough visual information to render accurate and detailed representations of the swill milk business. This is likened to Henri Cartier-Bresson’s description of a “decisive moment” in photography, that he explains as, “To take photographs means to recognize — simultaneously and within a fraction of a second — both the fact itself and the rigorous organization of visually perceived forms that give it meaning.”

380 Considering the detail in this illustration, Berghaus was likely close enough to be seen by the milkmen. Perhaps his presence was of no concern to these men working, or their attention was so focused on the cow’s disposal that they did not notice him. It is also likely that Berghaus and his fellow artists drew crude sketches to later finish in detail back at the office.381 The caption on this image reads: “Exposure of the milk trade. — Dragging out a dead cow, just after milking, from the stables connect[ed] with the distillery, corner of Flushing Avenue [sic] and Skillman Street, Brooklyn, from a drawing made on the spot by our own artist. — See page 869.” The caption confirms the obvious and provides specific information about the facility and its location. And, perhaps most importantly, the caption indicated that this was drawn “on the spot” by one of Leslie’s reporter-artists. Unlike a photograph or other visual content that typically appears alongside a story in today’s

381 Surviving original sketches from the U.S. Civil war offer a window into the artist-reporter’s process. Quick, rough sketches outline the action they captured with notation on how to fill in the detail back in New York.
newspapers, the illustrations in *Leslie’s* often stood alone on a page and the caption provided a page number for readers to go for supplemental textual information.

Aside from the cow’s contorted corpse, the other noticeable element in this illustration is the man in the middle of the image. He is one of the two dragging the cow. Like all of the men in this depiction, he is dressed in what any reader would recognize as working-class clothing. Two of the four men can be seen from head to toe, and they are both wearing knee-high boots — not unusual footwear for someone working with livestock. While a sophisticated man might be sketched in a top hat, coat with tails and a tie, all of these men are wearing loose-fitting, long-sleeved shirts, and one has a scarf around his neck. Three of the four men are wearing short, soft hats while the fourth is wearing a cowboy-styled hat. Their dress, is a strong indicator of their occupation and their class and comes through even in this black and white sketch in the newspaper.

Whereas this type of sketch cannot give the kind of detail a larger portrait can of a person’s face, the shape of all four men’s faces can be seen. What is striking about the portrayal of the man who is the focal point of the illustration is his face. His complexion is pale with a discolored nose, sunken-in eyes under a protruding forehead, and an upper jaw extending beyond the lower jaw. The textual description of his face cannot begin to describe what the drawing connotes — he has simian, or ape-like, features. Any contemporary nineteenth century reader would likely understand this man to be Irish. According to L. Perry Curtis, Jr., author of *Apes and Angels: The Irishman in Victorian Caricature*, there were a set of common features used to represent Irish in drawings
during the Victorian era that often presented Irish as “as a creature not fully civilized and not quite human.”\textsuperscript{382} He continues to explain that by the end of 1850s, “no respectable reader of comic weeklies—and most of their readers were respectable—could possibly mistake the simous nose, long upper lip, huge, projecting mouth, and jutting lower jaw… for any other category of undesirable or dangerous human being than that known as Irish.”\textsuperscript{383} Although \textit{Leslie’s} was promoted as a serious newspaper, illustrators such as Berghaus would chose familiar and often-used visual stereotypes to inform readers — at a glance — of their subject’s societal status or ethnicity. To reinforce the pictorial content, the text sometimes explains that many who worked as laborers in the distillery stables were of Irish ancestry.

The stereotype of the Irish as ape-like has roots in U.S. and European history, thanks in part to cartoonists such as John Leech who drew for the comedic publications \textit{Punch}. Leech and others established an Irish Celt caricature that followed the Irish to the United States.\textsuperscript{384} By the 1840s the character of Irish-Americans was cemented in the culture as “a fixed set of observable physical characteristics” and Irish men were portrayed as “‘low-browed’, ‘brutish’ and even ‘simian’ in popular discourse,” according to the author of \textit{Whiteness of a Different Color}.\textsuperscript{385}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{383} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{384} Ibid.: 29-32.
\end{flushright}
Judith Walkozitz explains that in nineteenth century literature, urban explorers cemented a “privileged gaze,” influenced by anthropology and constructed the poor “as a race apart, and outside of the national community.” Thomas Nast would make this caricature of “ape-like Irish-men with ragged clothes and battered top hats,” well known later in the century when he drew cartoons of the New York Tammany Hall. This visual connotation of the “swill milkmen” as simian is not isolated. Portraying the stable workers as sub-human would be repeated in many illustrations about swill milk.

The myth of the dirty, ignorant immigrant is perpetuated in many of these illustrations. Leslie used this myth to show that only the poorest of the poor in New York were employed by the swill milk industry. The myth also worked well as indicator of the corruption and unsanitary conditions of the stables. Although these news illustrations do not take the artistic license that political cartoon often do, the exaggerated representations help reify, “the myth that Irish poor were burly but unintelligent,” and that Irish were “were prone to be promiscuous, irreligious, and lazy,” as the author of Apes and Angels articulates. Drawing persons with apish characteristics plays into the myth of the poor, dirty Irish immigrant. A reader would be able to quickly ascertain who these working men were and surmise their societal socio-economic status by these physical facial features as well as their clothing and their location. The text also helped frame the

388 Ibid.
images, as stable workers were often referred to derogatorily as “milkmaids” — that time-honored practice of attacking a man’s masculinity by referring to him as female.

One of Leslie’s artists-illustrators captioned, “Sketch of the model ‘milkmaid’ at the cow-stables connected with Husted’s Distillery” for an illustrations that appeared in the May 15, 1858 issue (Figure 4-2). No accompanying article provides context for this illustration, thereby allowing this racialized and gendered image to work on a level of myth. However, by this time, a regular reader of Leslie’s would be familiar with the portrayals of the “milkmaids,” and this illustration may have been merely as further evidence of the nasty men who worked in the swill milk distilleries and stables.
Figure 4-2

In the illustration, three men are in full view, from head to toe, and one of the three men is working, who is sketched from behind. They are dressed like working-men and have similarly simian faces. What we do not know is the proximity of the reporter-artist who sketched this illustration to these men. With the reported violence against Leslie’s artists, it is hard to believe that these men willingly posed for this illustration. Perhaps this was sketched before Leslie’s first issue was published.

The May 29 cover is an example illustrating the visual differences between dignified men and the swill milkmen (Figure 4-3). The cutline explains what is
happening: “Exposure of Another Swill Milk Stable, Situated on Thirty-ninth Street and Tenth Avenue. Resistance of the Infuriated Hibernian to the Entrance of the Health Wardens and our Artist to his Portion of the Swill Cow Stables.”

Figure 4-3

Eight men are pictured; three in the foreground, four in background, and one who appears to be a police officer straddles the foreground and background. Leslie’s artist, Berghaus, is drawn as the second man from the left. He stands tall, wearing a top hat and a nicely fitting suit with small, pointed dress shoes. His moustache looks well groomed,

389 “Hibernian” is a Latin word used to reference Irish persons.
and he is portrayed with hand on the door of the stable, as if he is about to open it. The first man on the left is one of the “Hibernian” milkmen who is pictured leaning towards Leslie’s artist and another man, presumably the Health Warden. The swill milkman’s pants are baggy and rolled up around his ankles, and he is leaning over in an aggressive stance, in his left hand up in a defensive position with a whip and his right hand in a fist. The Health Warden, like Berghaus, is dressed in a top hat and suit, and is shown pulling his suit jacket back to expose his badge, which a viewer would understand as something that gives him authority. The police officer is observing what seems to be a verbal confrontation between the health official and the milkman. The officer is visually identifiable by his uniform and badge. While not the focal point of the image, three milkmen, identifiable by their simian-looking features, appear in the background. This illustration also draws on the “angry Irish” stereotype by drawing this one to look aggressive. A man in a top hat and suit is portrayed from behind with one arm out with a walking stick that seems to be raised in a defensive posture to fend off the dirty milkmaids.

What is striking about this image is the stark visual contrast between the swill milk stable workers, the authorities and Leslie’s reporter-artist. Their dress is an immediate signifier of their class status, and anyone viewing this illustration would be able to identify who is who in an instant. Body language communicates a lot in this engraving as well. The men of authority and higher social status stand tall while three of the four persons coded as swill milkmen are hunched over, like an ape, and look
aggressive. This engraving portrays a confrontation, and Leslie’s artist, presented as siding with the authorities. While the caption does not indicate this illustration as an ‘on-the-spot’ sketch, it certainly has the quality of an eyewitness account.  

Several more examples of the reporter-artist as a part of the news story indicate a sense authenticity to the pictorial representation. For example, in the same May 29 issue, the interior of the still milk stable is pictured with the caption, “Our artist’s visit to the 16th street distillery stables, after our exposure. The infuriated Irish ‘milkmaid’ vents his rage upon the poor diseased brutes, in his endeavors to make them stand up and prove how robust their health is, but kicking and swearing were both in vain.” As one of three illustrations on page 404, this example provides a visual narrative that also compares and contrasts class differences. The image of the interior of a stable would be a familiar one to those keeping pace with Leslie’s exposé. This image portrays the interior of the Thirty-ninth Street and Tenth Avenue stable. Regular readers would immediately recognize two individuals from the front-page illustration — the milkman with the switch/whip and the man known to the viewer as Leslie’s illustrator. The ape-like Irish milkman has wide eyes and an open mouth, looking upset as he leans over a cow lying on the ground with what appear to be large, open sores on its hips and backside. His switch is in an up in one hand and his other hand is clenched in a fist. The position of his arm implies that he is about to strike the animal, which is confirmed if one also reads the cutline associated with

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390 In Pearson, "Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper and Harper's Weekly: Innovation and Imitation in Nineteenth-Century American Pictorial Reporting," she says that Leslie’s published the artists at work to lend more authenticity to the illustration and their reporting.
this engraving. The Health Warden, in contrast, looks composed. Leslie’s reporter-artist Berghaus stands next to the Warden, looking directly at the milkman and the cow on the ground. Both the Health Warden and Berghaus appear stoic while the milkman is hunched over with a wild look on his face. The depiction communicates further evidence that swill milk is a notorious business. The low-class Irish man, illustrated as violent and disorderly, reveals that his kind do not know the difference between right and wrong, or are too ignorant to know any better.

**Diseased Brutes: Neglect and Mistreatment of Cows**

Not only does the portrayal of the Irish milkman raging against the “poor, diseased brute” indicate class difference, it is also an example of a second narrative that emerges in many illustrations: the wholesale abuse and neglect of the swill milk cows. After all, the claims about swill milk as “poison” surfaced because the cows were kept in crowded, unventilated stables, fed only distillery slop, and were riddled with disease that was evident all over their bodies. The written descriptions of the cows and their quality of life are vivid and accompany illustrations that highlight their deplorable physical condition. The written descriptions are graphic:

The portrait of the cow on page 384 was sketched from life, in the Sixteenth street stables, on the North River end. This poor animal was covered with running ulcers, and was altogether a sight too disgusting, and yet pitiable to behold. Reflect, citizens, consumers of milk—ponder on the fact that this wretchedly diseased animal is regularly milked day
by day, and the milk dispensed perhaps to your own home!
Shall this pest-house be allowed to remain?\textsuperscript{391}

The text “amplifies” the illustration of a swill milk cow that appears on page 384 (Figure 4-4). In this image the animal is drawn confined to the stall with a rope around its neck — a rope so short that the animal could hardly lie down comfortably. There are three sores that exhibit the “running ulcers” described in the text. Two of the three sores look fist-sized. The cow’s head is level with its back with an expressionless look on its face.

\textsuperscript{391} May 15, 1858, p. 380.
The May 15 cover of *Leslie’s* features a cow held up off of the ground by a harness because the cow can no longer support its own weight (Figure 4-5). There appears to be a large, oozing abscess on the cow’s hip. The animal’s tongue hangs out, another visual indicator that if this cow is not already dead, it is well on its way. The man milking this cow, once again, looks apelike. The written account of this illustration appears a few pages into this issue and gives further detail to what is happening: “Our front page cut represents one of the most revolting facts connected with the swill milk business. We have stated that cows are milked so long as they can stand, and when they can no longer stand alone they are either held up by men or by mechanical means.” The illustration provides shocking visual evidence of the lengths the swill milk industry would go to harvest every last drop of milk out of a cow? It is another example of how cruelly the animals were treated, and the image likely appealed to the sensibilities of readers who might have pets of their own and could emphasize. Many of the illustrations of diseased and dying cows begs the question of what quality of milk a nearly dead cow could produce.
There is no shortage of images portraying the abuse of cows. Leslie’s readers are first introduced to the condition of the cow’s living quarters in an engraving that spans the upper part of two pages in the May 8, 1858 issue (Figure 4-6). A description of what readers see explains, “The stables, as we have said, are filthy in the extreme. They are long, rude wooden shanties, with roofs so low that we can touch them by extending our arms, and so thickly hung with cobwebs that we could assert that no cleansing operation had even been carried on since the stables were erected.” The article continues to explain that the rendition of this stable on page 360, “gives a faithful and most accurate idea of
the arrangements of the interior of the cow stables,” but they cannot even begin to show the amount of dirt or the smell. How do you draw smell? The words that accompany this illustration give meaning to way in which this illustration is drawn, to be a dark, crowded and filthy place.

Figure 4-6
The milkmen appearing in the images take on the same, familiar visual stereotypes: protruding foreheads and ape-looking faces. From the subheading titled, “Attack upon out Artist by the swill ‘milkmaids’—His Statement” one might assume that this man is coming towards the artist to intimidate the reporter. The implied depth in this
image gives a viewer an as-far-as-the-eye-can-see sense of the stable’s size through the visual repetition of the support beams. Unlike a photograph, everything in this panoramic illustration is in focus, omitting no detail. In an instant, the drawing communicates to readers that this is a huge facility. The wooden support beams lead one’s eye from the foreground to the background of the images. In the foreground, the detail of a miserable looking cow. It has heavy eyelids, and big sores drip with pus. The cow has no tail, its head is low, and the udders look swollen. There is a rope around her neck. She is standing in front of a trough where steam is rising, indicative of the hot swill that the cows are reportedly fed. There is a second cow in the foreground on the other side of the picture, lying down, and one can see that the rope around the cow’s neck secures it to a stall. This animal does not seem to have room to move; the cows are lined up in very close proximity to one another. The wooded stalls hide the appearance of the rest of the cows, other than their heads. One cow has her tongue sticking out, so as to signify that she is hot. One cow in the foreground is drawn with a forlorn facial expression. There are many empathetic depictions of cows through the swill milk series. Cows are drawn to draw in the reader and play upon their sympathies, giving the animals human qualities that indicate suffering and pain, such as heavy eyelids and tears.

Leslie’s use of anthropomorphism seems tied to tradition in many cultures that once positioned animals a mythical beings, and the use of animals in metaphor. Before the routine domestication of animals for meat and milk, explains John Berger in About Looking, “Animals first entered the human describes as messengers and promises.” The
process of looking at an animal, and in turn, that look is returned. “And yet the animal is distinct,” Berger says, “and can never be confused with man [sic]. Thus, a power is ascribed to the animal, comparable with human power but never coinciding with it.” It is important to remember that in mid-nineteenth century New York City, animals would be freely roaming the streets. The average New Yorker would likely have daily contact with animals, and in some cases, sharing the same resources, such as water, as humans. Leslie was summoning a memory, perhaps, of a better time, by using the dairy cows as metaphor in his swill milk series, as “anthropomorphism was integral to the relation between man and animal and was an expression of their proximity.”

The cow illustration described in Figure 4-4 and the cow portrayed on the bottom left side of Figure 4-6 are two examples of animals acting as a stand-in for human suffering. Drawn anthropomorphically, the cow illustrations were meant to evoke sympathy from viewers as well as disgust to know that these animals are the vessels of the milk many in the city drink and give to their children. The sad, weary face and eyes on the cow in Figure 4-6 were certainly drawn to evoke an emotional reaction. One could certainly empathize with this miserable-looking animal, and giving it human-like qualities — the sad-looking facial expression — would only make an association even stronger. If one looks closely at the cow’s face in (Figure 4-7), there appears to be a teardrop on her check. Like a child suffering from the effects of consuming swill milk, this cow is the picture of misery, driven to tears.

“Hurrah for Frank Leslie”: The “Barnum Effect” in Promotional Illustrations

The mistreatment of cows, the filthy stables where the cows lived and were milked, and the uncouth Irish swill “milkmaids” who worked with the animals and delivered the milk to the people of New York are all clearly identifiable visual narratives in Leslie’s swill milk series. But Frank Leslie was an astute businessman as well as an editor/journalist. He took opportunities to remind his readers throughout his swill milk investigation that his work was vital to the public’s health, and that he bore great financial costs to bring news of this evil to the people. For example, he illustrated the first
arrests of the swill milk wagon drivers — the first municipal action taken after Frank Leslie published his first illustrations about the swill milk business. Leslie did not miss the opportunity to show his readers the arrests, and he also managed to give himself a self-congratulatory accolade in the caption: “Scene in the Park: The Swill Milk Men Arrested and Taken Before the Mayor, Amid the Jeers of the Crowds and Shouts of Hurrah for Frank Leslie!” (Figure 4-8). The illustration is drawn as a large scene to demonstrate the magnitude of the arrests, and provides evidence to readers that the guilty are being taken to jail. Visual cues, such as the large crowds of people who filled the stairs to the Courthouse, emphasized the public support for the swill milk arrests. A middle or upper-class man stands in front of one wagon and appears to be waiving his hat in the air in celebration. A formally dressed couple on the bottom left of the illustrations look on. Several horse-drawn wagons are shown that hold those arrested, pictured on the street outside of the building, showing readers that justice at last was being served.

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393 Many swill milkmen were arrested and fined for failing to have their milk wagons properly registered and marked with identifying signage.
Some pictorial content in *Leslie’s* reveals a recurring self-promotional narrative in relation to the swill milk investigation as well. One of the more obvious examples is the visual treatment of *Leslie’s* investigative team when they encountered the swill stable workers. It was widely reported in *Leslie’s*, week after week, that reporter-artists and other investigative reporters were attacked with stones and threatened with violence. While scholars surmise that the method of placing direct representations of illustrators into their images was used as a technique to authenticate the reality of the event, the circumstance in which they were drawn reveal the hardships they endured to bring the
swill milk story to the public. For example, a May 22, 1858 illustration depicted one of Leslie’s investigators in danger of being attacked by a swill milk wagon driver (Figure 4-9). The caption directed readers to find a description in last week’s paper. The written account explained that a milk wagon driver loaded up his cart with “cobble-stone” to use to attack one of Leslie’s detectives. “He [the swill milk cart driver] raised his right hand to throw one ; but our detective, quick at thought, showed him his persuader, at sight of which the milkman dropped the stone and pursued his journey, and tried to elude him by driving into the intricate parts of Five Points.” A viewer of this illustration would presume that the man wielding the rock was a swill milk wagon driver, because a horse drawing a wagon with a milk container is pictured with no driver. Instead, the driver hides under a canopy on the sidewalk, but he is seen by Leslie’s investigator, evidenced by the pointing gesture of Leslie’s man towards the man with the rock. The two men are dressed very differently, as per the usual class-specific dress codes to further indicate to readers who is a “good guy” and who is a “bad guy,“ so to speak. Any confusion as to what is illustrated was easily clarified by the cutline: “Attack Upon one of our Detectives by a Swill-Milkman, at the corner of Canal and Laurens Streets.” The “detective” is one of Leslie’s employees; it seems likely that illustration was recreated from a recollection.

and not sketched “on the spot” as an eyewitness drawing.

Figure 4-9

Another story about an attack on one of Leslie’s men reinforces the stereotypes the violent, irrational Irish swill milkman. The story is told of a milkman who ran out of a liquor store (a stereotypical place for an Irishman to hide out) when the detective rode by and tried to grab the head of the reporter’s horse. The detective reportedly pulled out his revolver, and the man went back into the store, only to return with his own revolver, threatening to “blow his brains out” if he continued to follow him. The story continued that the swill milk cart driver, Barney Mullen, demanded that the detective be arrested.
When Mullen and the reporter reached the Sixteenth precinct station, police officer Captain Carpenter intervened. “We drove off the exasperated crowd of Irishmen howling and running after me, endeavoring to catch the wagon,” Leslie’s reporter explained in words. He explained that Carpenter told Mullen and the other Irishmen that we would be at the Sixteenth Street stables in the morning “with a force to see that he and the other swill milkmen didn’t interfere with Leslie’s men.” The law was clearly on Frank Leslie’s side, this narrative suggests, and his reporter-artists and investigators did their jobs well, in spite of the grave danger they were in.

The stoicism of Leslie’s reporter-artist in contrast with the violent, “uncouth” Irish immigrants can also be observed in a July 10, 1858 illustration (Figure 4-10). On the back cover of this issue, Leslie’s artist Berghaus, by now a recognizable figure, is shown standing tall, dressed in a topcoat and top hat with a newspaper under his arm. He appears unflappable in a crowd of men and boys who are depicted as rambunctious. The crowd is dressed in working-class garb, and some have clenched fists while one appears to be holding a long stick in an aggressive manner. What appears to be a wagon with a milk container is on the far right — visual cues that these men are likely swill milkmen. And if they are indeed swill milkmen, they are also likely Irish. In the crowd surrounding the artist, one boy is shown holding his finger to his nose and presumably wiggling his fingers in front of Berghaus in a taunting, defiant act. The face of the little boy with his hand to his face is drawn to look like a monkey, and another boy flanking Berghaus on

395 May 15, 1858.
the left side also has with simian-like features. It is another example of racializing the Irish by drawing them as apes; an effective way to debase minority groups in nineteenth-century America.

Figure 4-10

*Other Visual Evidence*

Beyond the illustrations that depicted real-time and on-the-spot sketches, Leslie provided further visual evidence from the investigation: maps, data tables, and scientific drawings. These are all examples of how Leslie and his reporter-artists were experimenting with visual approaches to present complex information and ideas in
journalism were novel at the time. For example, a map published on May 22, 1858 displayed a graphical representation of the Sixteenth Street stables, the distillery and related industries, such as the butcher’s shop (Figure 4-11). One of the city’s largest natural resources, the Hudson River, is a short distance away. The caption reads, “Plan of Messrs. Johnson’s Sixteen Street Cow Stables, N.Y. from a Diagram in the Health Commissioner’s Office, With Additional Details, Showing the Arrangement of the Cows in the Stables, Etc. Sketched on the spot by our Artists.” It is fair to assume that the additional details include the swill-related content. The drawing indicates where the “under ground swill pipe” is located that delivers the distillery “slop” under 10th Avenue to the land where several cow stables exist. If this map is approximately to scale, it seems clear that the cow stables take up the most space on the map, and, it also seems inevitable that the runoff from the cow stables would travel straight into the river.
This map is an early example of efforts to present information graphically, commonly referred to as “information graphics” in journalism. A familiar feature today, information graphics appear in various forms, from data tables housing baseball box scores to a pie chart or a bar graph that might accompany a news item about the economy or politics. Edward R. Tufte, author of *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information*, identifies graphical excellence as possessing several key qualities, including compelling data and design, complex ideas presented with precision, and the greatest number of ideas.
presented succinctly with the least ink in the smallest space. Leslie’s efforts to further inform the public about the swill milk business with information graphics exemplifies his experimentation with new and previously unseen ways his newspaper was an innovator in visual journalism.

Other examples of information graphics included columns and tables of data that provide the public with information that appeared in addition to the illustrated news narratives. The most striking examples of this form include the pages of streets and addresses that Leslie published, week after week, referencing the household and businesses where swill milk was delivered. Detectives working for Leslie’s followed and documented every place visited by delivery wagons that left from the swill milk stables. Figure 4-12 from May 8, 1858 is an example of one week’s listings of swill milk deliveries. Any reader could scan the columns of streets and addresses that were organized by the stable and its location, often either Brooklyn or today’s Manhattan. If nothing else, the massive amount of data demonstrates Leslie’s commitment to exposing the swill milk industry and the meticulous nature of the data collection. As the next chapter shows, many residents and business owners were appalled to learn by reading Leslie’s that they were taking swill milk.

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Illustrations that emphasize cause and effect, perhaps as a form of scientific evidence, also remain outside of the scope of the news illustrations analyzed above, primarily because they present visual information beyond what is observable with the “naked eye.” I call these examples “progression” drawings or illustrations — a technique Leslie used to show the slow suffering and deterioration of the swill milk cattle. One of his progression drawings shows the slow decline of a cow’s tail that has been subjected to an inoculation technique designed to save the animal from sickness. The caption explains what readers are seeing: “This illustrations shows the different stages of the cow, from the time the animal first enters the swill stables until the tail rots off from the disease after
the inoculation” (Figure 4-13). Leslie also published a drawing that demonstrated how the cow’s tail is sliced opened and part of a dead cow’s lung is inserted as a part of the inoculation process (Figure 4-14). Another example in the June 5 issue illustrates the consequences of a bad diet; it’s a progression drawing of what happens to the cow’s hoofs over time (Figure 4-15). One could not see this deterioration all at once, of course, so Leslie’s presented a pictorial representation of what would happen to the animal in due course. This progression illustration also includes an image of a cow on a lift and pulley system (pictured previously in Figure 4-5), a method necessary in order to milk cows that could no longer support their own weight on their deteriorated hooves and weakened legs.

Figure 4-13
INOCULATING THE COW FOR THE SWILL MILK STABLE DISEASE.—
1, MAKING THE INCISION IN THE TAIL; 2, INSERTING THE VIRUS;
3, THE INOCULATED TAIL BOUND UP.

Figure 4-14
Figure 4-15

For years prior to *Leslie’s* exposé, scientists went on record regarding the deterioration of swill-fed cows’ teeth, saying that due to the poor diet and horrid living conditions, swill milk cows unnaturally lost their teeth. Leslie showed readers this in the May 22, 1858 issue. He presented two images; one that illustrated a set of healthy teeth and another showing abnormally shaped teeth in a state of acute decay. Appearing side by side, the evidence was presented comparatively, showing the teeth of a cow fed on a “natural” diet while the other example was from the mouth of a cow fed on an “artificial”
diet. Figure 4-16 shows the teeth sketches in context; Figure 4-17 and Figure 4-18 are close-up images to better show detail.

In the lower, left corner of this page, there is an illustrated depiction of a murder at the swill milk stables, allegedly between two Irish stable workers.

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397 In the lower, left corner of this page, there is an illustrated depiction of a murder at the swill milk stables, allegedly between two Irish stable workers.
Figure 4-16
Figure 4-17

Figure 4-18
During the height of the swill milk exposé, Leslie referred to the scientific evidence provided by medical professionals about the “deleterious” properties of swill milk to make his case against the industry. However, illustrations of this nature were not the focus on his campaign during the summer and fall of 1858. But scientific drawings derived from microscopic imaging did appear in 1859 when Leslie’s newspaper revisits the swill milk investigation when a second investigation of swill milk was conducted by the New York Academy of Medicine. The April 23, 1859 issue is striking for the detailed, scientific renderings displaying illustrations of milk through a microscope’s lens (Figure 4-19). Leslie provided his readers with illustrations of microphotography of milk samples from grass-fed cows and swill-fed cows. The microscopic content presents distinctly difference images. Calling it milk fat, the scientists claimed that the grass-fed cows’ milk contained a higher fat content and was therefore healthier and more nutritious. Even an untrained observer could see that there were fewer microscopic particles in the microscope images of the swill-fed cows milk sample. By publishing these images, Leslie could accomplish two things by publishing these scientific images. First, he could present an accurate representation of the scientific data collected from the Academy of Medicine’s investigation. Second, as the author of *Representations of the Microcosm: The Claim of Objectivity in 19th Century Scientific Microphotography* explains, images like these were a “means of documenting the results of microscopic
analysis, uncontaminated by the subjectivity of the observer." This likely worked to enhance the credibility of Leslie’s pictorial information.

Figure 4-19
Medical Claims: Death by Milk

Using medical theory, Leslie explained how swill milk could cause the death of roughly 8,000 children and infants annually: “[Swill milk] remains as an indigestible substance in the stomach; and we should suppose would produce the effects usual to children when their stomachs are loaded with improper food—“convulsions, vomiting and purging.” It was also reported that swill milk “is the principle cause of cholera infantum and marasmus, to say nothing of other diseases.”

The “convulsions, vomiting and purging” allegedly happened when milk was not properly digested. At the time, the leading medical evidence alleged that swill milk, because of its lack of butterfat, did not “coagulate” properly in the stomach, and therefore was not digested in a timely manner. Experiments on both distillery milk and “pure” milk exhibited markedly different rates of coagulation: the “milk globules” in swill could take up to six hours to conglomerate, while pure milk globules only took one hour. By all accounts, coagulation seemed to be the leading theory among those in the medical community that cited swill milk as a deadly drink; this is evident in many letters to the editor reprinted in Leslie’s, including one from Dr. Griscom.

In conjunction with the medical evidence, the illustrations of diseased swill milk cattle and the shameful, Irish “milkmaids” communicated meaning to craft a narrative that swill milk was unsanitary, unhealthy, deadly evil in the community that needed immediate eradication. Frank Leslie, often in a dramatic, sensational fashion, wrote about

399 May 8, 1858.
swill milk as an unpunished crime, as this example exemplifies: “For the midnight assassin we have the rope and the gallows; for the robber the penitentiary; but for those who murder our children by the thousands we have neither reprobation nor punishment.”

The written accounts, meant to amplify the illustrations of death and dying, repeated a carefully crafted narrative to readers that swill milk killed. Leslie also used of medical theory indirectly supported the visual narrative. That is, seeing these illustrations without reading any of the medical evidence — images of sore-ridden, dying cows — would beg the question: How could pure, wholesome milk come animals in this physical condition?

**Conclusion**

Leslie’s swill milk exposé offered a new narrative about swill milk previously unseen in the press. *Showing* images of the grotesquely diseased cows made it quite easy to believe that the milk these creatures produced was unhealthy, or worse, was deadly. Furthermore, Leslie’s pictures helped disseminate information about the medical and social problems associated with “swill milk” on a mass scale. Leslie’s pictorial exposé sparked widespread coverage of the problem in the newspapers that others before him were unable to do on a mass scale. Despite books on the topic, sporadic coverage in the press, and articles in medical journals, Leslie did what others before him did not — make swill milk a major public health issue and prompt a very public city investigation.

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400 May 8, 1858, p. 359.
It is estimated that milk produced in urban, swill milk stables-distilleries supplied two-thirds of New Yorkers with their milk. If the press, according to Benedict Anderson, functions in part to connect persons who would otherwise never meet, Leslie’s pictorial exposé would have exposed certain classes of people to the underbelly of the swill milk business that they likely would never have seen otherwise. Elites and a rising middle class could live uptown, and the swill milk stables in modern day lower Manhattan and Brooklyn could be easily avoided. By identifying swill milk as a large “public” problem, using his newspaper, Leslie positioned swill milk as a larger, societal problem that needed municipal intervention in order to improve “public health.”

But Leslie’s news engravings also perpetuated xenophobic attitudes towards the Irish and the poor; for example, labeling the Irishman stable workers as “milk maids” was no doubt intended as an insult to their masculinity. By dehumanizing the Irish men using common, simian pictorial representations, Leslie reinforced nineteenth century attitudes towards this group of immigrants. This is a window into the negative side of public health campaigns from the beginning: dirty, poor people compromise the health of the pious and well to do. In contrast, Leslie humanized the cows by giving them human characteristics such as sad-looking faces and tears; the cows were elevated so that readers could empathize with their plight. Ironically, humans portrayed in his illustrations were often represented as subhuman, to encourage outrage about their activities.

Leslie’s reportage is also a precursor to the importance of mass communication and public health. Public health campaigns are reliant on the mass media to communicate
information to protect the public health. Simple things that we take for granted today, such as covering your mouth when you cough, or washing your hands before you eat, were habits promoted by public health officials, and they used mass media to get the information on a wide scale.

The assertion that swill milk was a killing, poisonous drink was a dominant narrative that amplified the illustrations of the swill milk industry. The medical community, for the most part, was behind Leslie’s claims that swill milk was a deadly drink. Newspapers repeated Leslie’s claims that thousands of deaths among the city’s children could be blamed on swill milk — deaths that had been attributed to other common illnesses of the day, such as cholera or yellow fever. While the swill milk industry did not collapse under Leslie’s uninhibited coverage of the business, his exposé launched a new awareness among persons who were otherwise not aware of how the milk they were drinking and feeding to their families was produced. The distribution of swill milk was understood as widespread around the city of New York and its surrounding areas, such as Brooklyn, affecting the working and middle classes, and some elites, alike.

The intensity of Leslie’s pictorial reportage was never matched in later years. While several more swill milk investigations would be conducted throughout the rest of the century by the New York municipality and beyond, what makes Leslie’s 1858 investigation stand out among the others is the abundance of pictorial representations, and it is perhaps the only inquiry into the swill milk business where a newspaper publisher played so prominent a role in a city investigation.
Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper produced a concentrated pictorial campaign against the swill milk industry that began in May of 1858 and continued in every issue for three straight months. The first issue in August of 1858 would end the succession of illustrated content on swill milk, but the newspaper continued to publish written content about swill milk in nearly every issue through the end of 1858. The next chapter, Chapter Five, is an examination of the public’s reception to Leslie’s exposé. Linking swill milk to the death of children through images of suffering cattle in crowded and unclean swill milk stables not only caused a public uproar — it also prompted city officials to take action. The daily New York newspapers picked up the story as well as newspapers throughout the country and in the Western territory. Cultural artifacts found from the period also suggest that “swill milk” permeated popular culture, at least in the city of New York.
Chapter Five: Pure Country Milk, Nothing More or Less: Responding to Leslie’s Swill Milk Exposé

The last number of “Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper” shows up the “swill milk business” in a most sickening manner… They are fed on poisoned milk, and any man who keeps such as establishment as Mr. Husted should be indicted and sent to the Penitentiary. Poisoned whiskey for men is bad enough—but poisoned milk for babies is the refinement of crime.

— “Correspondence of the Herald” from The Daily Cleveland Herald Thursday, May 13, 1858

When the above quote appeared in this Cleveland, Ohio paper on the 13 of May, New York City area residents were likely aware of Leslie’s swill milk illustrations. Mr. Husted’s Brooklyn distillery and dairy operation was one of Leslie’s first targets in his attempt to shut down the swill milk industry. The quoted text above is an example of the discourse that emerged in the press coverage — the accusation that swill milk killed thousands of infants and young children every year in the city. Swill milk was nothing but “poison” perpetuated by corrupt business people who propagated a societal evil.

The last chapter identified, examined and interpreted the visual narratives offered by Leslie’s pictorial campaign against the swill milk industry. Leslie told a story about the sick and dying dairy cows that provided city residents with the majority of its milk. These cows, fed on the byproduct from distilleries — “slop” — which caused malnourishment, suffered from physical deterioration and disease. Only days after
Leslie’s first issue “swill milk” issue, Frank Leslie met with the Mayor Tiemann to discuss what he knew about the industry. At the conclusion of their meeting the Mayor was convinced that the city’s Board of Health must launch an official investigation on the business of swill milk.

The analysis revealed a complex, yet limited, understanding of the problem. Riddled with wholesale xenophobic representations of Irish dairy workers, Leslie’s pictorial reporting, in today’s view, seems hyperbolic and sensational at times. To understand how contemporary viewers interpreted and understood Leslie’s pictorial reports, this chapter examines how Leslie’s exposé was received in the public sphere. It is evident in the press alone that Leslie’s reportage had an impact; the news generated a significant amount of interest and commentary in local newspapers in 1858, and his pictorial reports also made national and international news. Little news coverage about “swill” milk appeared in the media before Leslie’s pictorial reportage; a multiple historical newspaper database search on swill milk revealed almost no stories about the issue outside of the New York City area prior to Leslie’s pictorial exposé.

Reform efforts to rid the city of the swill milk business before Leslie’s exposé had a limited audience and little effect on the industry. Led by Dr. Augustus Gardner, who reported that swill milk had “positively noxious properties” and little nutritional value, ultimately failed to persuade the New York Academy of Medicine to adopt a resolution to ban the practice, or prompt public officials to investigate the business.401 But when Leslie

used his illustrated newspaper to bring the swill milk problem to a larger audience, the public noticed. A significant discovery, as evidenced below, reveals that the discourse regarding the medical and social problems associated with “swill milk” appeared in various cultural artifacts and on a mass scale. Previously relegated to medical journals and books aimed at the scientific community, Leslie’s pictorial exposé sparked widespread coverage of the problem in other newspapers and permeated popular culture.

Leslie decisively illustrated the problem in pictures and words as a societal evil that killed, and other newspaper editors and New York correspondence recognized the significance of Leslie’s work and picked up the story. Doctors and regular citizens were compelled to write letters to Leslie, that he readily reprinted, offering their thanks and support for his exposé on swill milk. Beyond the news media, many used “swill milk” as a catch phrase. There are examples in the media where it was used as a metaphor when writers wanted to be provocative to make their larger point. Popular culture also embraced the scandal; songs about swill and plays on the topic emerged after Leslie’s first illustrations appeared in print. The business community also took note; establishments that served milk waged advertising campaigns in the press to ensure their customers that swill milk was not served in their markets, restaurants and hotels.

**Killer Milk: The News Following Leslie’s Pictorial Exposé**

Based on what was discovered in the newspaper coverage immediately following the publication of Leslie’s “swill milk” series, the New York dailies reported on the swill milk issue promptly. The New York *Herald, Times* and *Tribune* were the city’s largest
dailies, and all examples of the independent press. When editor James Gordon Bennett first published the *Herald* in 1840, his newspaper drastically contrasted with the contemporary “party” newspapers that were considered inaccessible to a mass audience. Party papers required one to know party platforms and the “ins and outs” of the political scene, according to journalism historian Frederic Hudson.\(^{402}\) The non-partisan nature of Bennett’s paper, just like the *Times* and the *Tribune*, would offer straightforward news written for a popular audience, and in 1858, these papers would circulate widely in the city.\(^{403}\) The first reports from the *Herald* after Leslie’s exposé, for example, covered the story as a municipal and public health issue. But the *Herald* could not resist reflecting on Leslie in a short piece titled “The Milk Agitation.” The intention and tone of the insult is likely lost to history, but when reporting on all of the “agitation about the bad milk sold in the city,” the *Herald* writer wondered why Wall Street had not yet taken up the issue. They note that the attention has “brought milk and money in abundance to its author, Frank Leslie,” and ask why a company has not been formed to “supply the community with the genuine article.”\(^{404}\)

The New York *Times*\(^ {405}\) covered the story in greater detail, including their report on May 12 that reported a meeting between Mayor Tiemann and Frank Leslie: “The Mayor is determined to take these swill-fed cows by the horns for the purpose of ascertaining the cause of the loss of their tails. He complimented Mr. Leslie on the

\(^{402}\) Hudson, *Journalism in the United States from 1690 to 1872*, 466-467.
\(^{404}\) The New York *Herald*, May 19, 1858.
\(^{405}\) At the time the New York *Times* was called the New York *Daily Times*.  

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exposures he has made, and promised his cordial support in rectifying the abuse complained of.” Using the idiom to take something “by the horns” — partly a joke about swill milk cows with no tails, but the comment also seemed to be poking fun at the mayor. But it is impossible, of course, to know the writer’s true intention. What does seem clear, however, is the fact that the Mayor saw the pictorial representations of diseased and dying cows without tails, and the other gruesome images sketched by on-the-spot reporters in Leslie’s. The following day, the Times dedicated several inches to a story titled “How We Poison Our Children.” They reflect, “Why its sale has so long been permitted is one of the marvels that we shall all ponder hereafter.” This article gives readers a stomach-turning description of the process of making swill milk, noting that Temperance Societies, the New York Academy of Medicine and the Board of Health had all tried unsuccessfully to abolish the business of feeding the macerated grain left over from making whiskey — the “swill” — to cows that produced the city’s milk.

“Swill Milk is no new thing to our City” the Times article continued, and reported that the power and money behind the swill milk business had kept it going for so many years. The pervasiveness of swill milk sales, according to the article, is thanks in part to many of the city’s Alderman who had waived ordinances rules to allow the practice to continue and flourish, including one Alderman who had formerly served as a “Swill Superintendent in Husted’s establishment.” The article concluded with a hopeful tone, directly crediting Frank Leslie. They explain how, after Leslie received swill milk and

found a “disgusting dose of milk and pus,” set out to conduct a full-scale investigation, and “dispatched his corps of reporters and artists to the head-quarters of the poison.” His illustrations are described by the *Times* as “pictures true to the life, and so shocking that the very word milk… turns the stomach.” Reporting that the Mayor has taken up the subject, the *Times* credited Leslie for putting the topic of swill milk back into the public’s consciousness: “So bold and thorough an attempt on the part of the widely circulated journal to arrest attention to an outrage that has lain patent to every thinking person for years, could not fail of wholesome results.” This article must have surely left readers understanding that credit is to Frank Leslie and his team of journalists, and now that people are seeing “pictures true to life,” there is a great hope that swill milk business has met the beginning of its end.\footnote{May 13, 1858.}

The mainstream press also reported that Mayor Tiemann immediately started arresting the milk cart drivers who distributed swill milk. The milk cart drivers were working-class individuals and not producers or owners of the swill milk stables and distilleries. Rather, they were easy and accessible targets to make it seem like the city was taking immediate action to do something about the swill milk problem. The correspondent for San Francisco’s *Daily Evening Bulletin* articulates the problem by explaining how the Mayor used a regulatory statute to close down the swill milk distribution: “Two mornings after Leslie’s exposé, some twenty or thirty milk carts were simultaneously arrested—not on the charge of selling swill milk, but for not displaying
any name or number. The more serious offense, it seems, is very difficult to prove, but the arrested milkmen were all fined for not exhibiting a number and the name of the dealer.”408 Like a modern-day seller of bootlegged tobacco or alcohol, the street-level seller is visible and can easily be arrested and fined while the hijacker/supplier goes scot-free.

The news coverage of Frank Leslie’s swill milk exposé was by no means limited to New York’s dailies. As a report published by the Springfield Republican explained, “The Mayor of New York is arraigning the dealers in swill milk at the rate of about twenty per day, and fining them $3 apiece.”409 Washington D.C.’s Daily National Intelligencer told its readers, “The Mayor and his police have been busy for some days past in arresting such or the milk-men as have been driving wagons without names or numbers, and the war against ‘swill-milk’ is likely to be kept up vigorously. It is charged that eight thousand children were poisoned to death last year, in New York city, by the impure stuff sold as ‘milk from the country.’”410 And the Lowell Daily Citizen and News from Lowell, Massachusetts reported that, “Mayor Tiemann has undertaken to suppress the sale of swill milk in New York. All unlicensed milk dealers will be brought before the Mayor and the quality of their milk investigated” on May 14.411

Some newspapers featured correspondence from their New York personnel, and they tended to provide detailed information about Leslie’s involvement in the

“excitement” surrounding swill milk, naming Frank Leslie or his paper directly. The opening quote from The Daily Cleveland Herald, for example, emphasized the truthfulness of Leslie’s reports: “If a tenth part of his statement is true, and it is all true, it is the imperative duty of the ‘City Fathers’ or the ‘Board of Health’ to abate Mr. Husted’s ‘Cow Stables’ as a nuisance, and he ought to be fed his own milk—made to take his own poison.” This is an example of one of the more colorful reports on Leslie’s pictorial expose.

Like Leslie’s, many other newspapers did not hesitate to call swill milk “poison” and blamed swill for a large number of deaths in the city. The statistical evidence that shows up in news articles about swill milk is derived from the medical community. Because Leslie’s swill milk exposé prompted a number of physicians to write letters in support of his investigation, credence was given to their medical expertise and their studies that linked swill milk to infant and child mortality. Physician’s letters were not limited to Leslie’s; the New York papers — the Herald, Times and Tribune — all reprinted letters as well. It is likely the Times’ early coverage of the swill milk excitement makes stronger connections when comparing swill milk to familiar disease, as well as citing that swill milk seems to be a disease affecting the poor and immigrants more than others. On May 22, the paper complimented the Board of Health for successfully reducing mortality rates of both diseases in 1854 and 1856, respectively, and pressed the
board to consider why, “according to carefully figured statistics—over 8,000 children” were killed by swill milk in the city.412

Continuing the swill milk is “evil” and “poisonous” narrative, the Chicago Daily Tribune ran a promotional paragraph on page 2 of its May 21 issue and dedicated nearly an entire page to reporting on New York’s swill milk problem. In its promotional paragraph it is explained to readers that, “The attention of the people of New York has been from time to time called to this great evil, without any practical result, until the matter was taken in hand by Frank Leslie.” They predicted, optimistically, that Leslie’s “vigor and earnest sincerity” reporting would surely help launch an investigation and lead to prosecutions of those involved in supplying swill milk to the city. Citing the New York Courier & Enquirer, the Chicago paper shared details about the swill milk “excitement” under the heading, “Poisonous Milk in New York.” They explain how distillery owners and milk-men have experimented with feeding distillery “slop” to cattle and have found it to be increasingly profitable, albeit at the expense of the public’s health. “The distiller derives great revenue from the so-called dairyman; the dairyman gains are increased tenfold by what would else be the refuse of the distiller” and “in such cases of money-making, both parties thrive at the expense of the third.” And like other reports, empathy for the cattle appears: “And there is another poor, dumb sufferer—the cow.” Like others, this report explains the terrible conditions of the dairy stables, the degeneration of the cows and proclaims the swill milk industry as an extremely profitable industry that

conducts its business at the expense of the people. The page 3 feature also reprinted letters that appeared in Leslie’s from “distinguished medical authorities” as well as the City Inspector’s report from the 15th of May that describes the dissection of one swill milk cow at the Johnson’s Sixteenth Street stables.  

The May 15 issue of The Congregationalist out of Boston also mentions Leslie directly, saying in a news item that, “Frank Leslie is exposing, in his Pictorial, the horrible swill milk manufacturing and milk adulteration, carried on in New York and Brooklyn. Children are fed upon this milk, and the result is, that the mortality amongst them exceeds immensely that of all other large towns, here or in Europe.” They say that swill may bring on not only cholera but also paralysis and “a host of other diseases,” and that a high number of children under five years of age die from one of these “milk diseases.”

It is important to note that there is a clear narrative in these news items that swill milk is as deadly as other diseases in New York, such as cholera or yellow fever. Or, as Leslie’s swill milk thesis suggested, that many of the deaths associated with cholera or miasmas were really the result of drinking swill milk.  

In October, Washington D.C.’s Daily National Intelligencer reported that New York’s death toll was greater than any

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414 The Congregationalist, May 14, 1858.  
415 For example, see the text in his inaugural issue on May 8, page 359.
world city of comparable size. They attributed damp living conditions, the “acid in swill milk” and bad ventilation as the “parents of cholera and scrofula.”

The swill milk story traveled a little slower, but did make the news as far as the West coast. On June 15 San Francisco’s *Daily Evening Bulletin* reported in a long article that “Gotham’s” population was being “systematically poisoned by milk-venders.” It continues, “To Frank Leslie’s *Illustrated Journal* the credit of this discovery is due.” But also recognizes that Leslie is an astute businessperson as well: “Leslie, of course, started the subject as an advertisement,” referring to the ads that initially appeared in the *Herald* and *Times*, “and he was greatly successful, for everybody had his paper in their hands the following day.”

A returning correspondent from the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* remarked about the “awful, hot city! What with the Britishers!—the stump-tailed cows!—swill milk, with *cholera infantum* its only moment, New York is alive with excitement! Wall Street is awakening, like Rip Van Winkle, from its shocks and shocking events!”

Between brief news items about the “slavery question,” the stock market, and a sarcastic announcement about the “Women’s Rights’ ladies” holding their eighth national convention, the correspondent for Washington D.C.’s *Daily National Intelligencer* reported on Saturday, May 15 that, “The Mayor and his police have been busy for some days past in arresting such or the milk-men as have been driving wagons

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416 *Daily National Intelligencer*, October 26, 1858.
without names or numbers, and the war against ‘swill-milk’ is likely to be kept up vigorously. It is charged that eight thousand children were poisoned to death last year, in New York city, by the impure stuff sold as ‘milk from the country.’”

A reprinted report from a correspondent for the Boston Journal insinuated that Leslie’s portrayal of swill milk was such a sensation that it reached the level of “gossip.” I interpret their discussion of gossip in the sense that Leslie’s engravings were the “talk of the town” and sensational, but Leslie’s reporting was not necessarily questioned as untrue. Under the title “Gastronomy Under Difficulties,” the correspondent suggested that the swill milk question is a more pressing problem than “in the time of the Saviour.” The Bostonian reporter also complained that Leslie’s portrayal of the “deceased and damaged cows” told only part of the story. He reported that meat shops were being investigated for serving up cats and dogs, and the coffee and bread makers are selling adulterated products. He reported that it was, “indeed astonishing, the pig-headedness of the New Yorkers in the matter of food.” He explained that, despite medical warnings over several years, thousands of children had died from bad milk and other “improper food and bodily treatment.” He does credit Leslie for his work for putting the subject in the headlines again, suggesting that the engravings captured the people’s attention: “Mr. Leslie the publisher, has taken the matter in hand and by means of pictures of the stalls, the cattle, the milkers, &c., has roused the public and the authorities.”

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\[419\] Daily National Intelligencer, May 15, 1858.

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An article about food preparation in the Bangor Daily Whig & Courier downplays the worry over swill milk. Although they do not want to endorse swill, they dismiss its deadly qualities. “Our city is much agitated on the question of “swill milk,” as if we are to believe the statistic makers… 50,000 children have been slain by this fell destroyer during the past eight or ten years.” This article, appearing to have been reissued from the American Agriculturalist, suggests that children are dying because their food is not being properly chopped into tiny pieces. “What does kill our children, then?” asks the article. “We answer unhesitantly that it is mainly unmasticated or unground food.” This speculation on what is really killing the city’s children is a good example of the scientific speculation occurring at the time. Without germ theory to explain illness, a popular diagnosis seen in the newspapers was the concept “coagulation.” Because swill milk did not coagulate quickly in the stomach, children could not properly digest the slop-fed drink, hence the real killer of children.

The dominant narrative that swill milk is poison, and the children drinking swill milk in New York City are dying at an alarming rate every year, emerges from the press coverage following Leslie’s initial illustrated issues. The press also conveyed credit to Leslie and his illustrated newspaper for “awakening” the public to the swill milk horrors. It is also implied that, despite news reports about swill milk over the years, the poisonous drink is the result of a powerful business lobby in cahoots with a dysfunctional city government. The Times article of May 13 reports to readers how swill milk is a part of a

larger problem of an ineffective health board and a City Inspector’s office that is a “sham and an impotent humbug.” It is clear that Leslie reignited an issue that had been at the top of mind from some for many years, and was finally reaching such a climax that something was going to be done about swill milk stables by the city government.

But, whereas some other press coverage questions the magnitude of swill milk, none question the authenticity of the illustrated content. In other words, nobody accused Leslie of false representations of reality. Conversely, they speak of it as “truth.” Perhaps what is not there may be more instructive than what is. Their trust in the accuracy of the reports must have something to do with the fact that the “swill milk” problem was not a new subject to anyone who had been paying attention to the dairy industry during the years prior to Leslie’s exposé. The matter of swill milk, perhaps, needed the methods of sensation and self-promotion to bring widespread attention to problem. Prior press coverage laid the groundwork for Leslie’s visual reporting to resonate quickly and strongly with the public.

**God Bless Frank Leslie: Letters to the Editor**

Frank Leslie himself did not hesitate to tell his readers how significant his pictorial reporting on swill milk was in the city of New York: “Our fearless exposure,” an editorial begins, “… is the subject of conversation of every group in the streets, in every railroad car and in every house.” Those who had once thought that the swill milk problem was “idle gossip” were now convinced that it was a killer, as people were, according to Leslie, “overwhelmed by the double evidence of the facts portrayed by our pen and our
pencil.” While his claims are self-serving a hyperbolic — “every house” etc. — his exposé compelled doctors and citizens alike to write letters of support to him and his reporters.

In a letter dated May 19, 1858, Nelson Sizer, editor of Phrenological Journal, wrote to Frank Leslie: “Your gigantic enterprise of saving New York and Brooklyn from the poison of “Swill Milk,” is destined to be a greater and more radical reform than has been produced in our midst in the last half century.” Sizer continues, “Every good man, every mother says, God Bless you!” It is signed, “I am, your friend and obligated citizen.” The sentiment that Frank Leslie had provided a much-needed public service is evident in this and other letters published in issues of his newspaper. And while not stated directly, the illustrations clearly were able to capture the public’s attention — unlike previous reporting on the swill milk problem.

Advertisements provide additional evidence that “mothers” are a target audience in this pictorial campaign. Leslie ran advertisements in a direct appeal fashion to women: “Every Wife and Mother In New York And Brooklyn should read the startling exposure of the swill milk they use, in Frank Leslie’s paper this day” read one ad in the New York Herald on May 6. Leslie highlighted a long letter from one mother who is explained as “a lady well-known and highly esteemed in this community.” The letter is cited as “perfectly conclusive” in illustrating that swill milk is poison and extremely harmful to

422 Leslie’s, May 15, 1858.
423 May 29, 1858.
424 The New York Herald, May 05, 1858.
children. Signed “Stanley,” the letter proceeds to tell a story from a mother who tells her story about her healthy child who was supposedly breast fed until she became ill and was “ordered by my physicians to wean the child.” She tells the story of a once healthy child that became sick with “disordered bowels” and later “cholera infantum.” Her doctor ordered “a change of air,” so she spent several weeks out of the city, where the child eventually recovered. Describing several trips to and from the city, she said that her child always became sick again upon returning to the city, until her neighbor, Charles Van Ness, provided her and her family with fresh milk daily. “The milk of beautiful, sleek looking cows that I could see grazing on the green grass,” she explained and concluded that “It was the milk alone which had poisoned my child.” Leslie touted this woman’s account as enough proof that “could not more plainly illustrate the fact that swill milk is the poison which kills our children by the thousands every year.”

Investigation Spreads to Other States

News about Frank Leslie’s pictorial reporting expanded outside of New York and Brooklyn, and the newspapers reported on Leslie’s investigations outside of New York. On May 19 the Herald reported that Officer Chase accompanied one of Leslie’s detectives when he visited a suspected swill milk stable in Jersey City. The news report said that Leslie’s reporter and the officer, after being asked to wait an hour and a half before inspecting the “swill milk institution,” snuck in an open door and “caught them in the act of cutting up a cow.” The story continued, explaining that, “a portion of the

425 May 15, 1858.
carcass was covered in blotches. The meat was nicely dressed and cut into small pieces.” The stable workers claimed that they were cutting the cow into smaller pieces so it would be easier to “throw it overboard.” Shortly after this discovery, a “Dutch butcher” approached with a cart with the intention to purchase the meat. Further claims were made that the dressed meat was actually for other livestock to eat. None the less, the butcher and two swill milk stable workers were “brought before the Recorder,” accused of killing and dressing a diseased swill milk cow.426 It is unclear that any crime was committed, but in light of the attention swill milk was receiving in the newspapers, it seems that public officials were trying to assuage the dress and sale of cows from known swill milk stables.

As evident in the example above from the New York Herald, another significant matter conveyed in the news narratives concerned selling the meat from swill milk cows after they had been milked “to death.” Leslie’s reported that many of the diseased cows were sold for slaughter and their beef was sold to the public, often as top-shelf beef. In an update to readers about the swill milk investigation, the Lowell Daily Citizen and News reported that, “the cows never get a pure drop of water from the time they enter the stables, but they must drink swill or nothing. They also ascertained that when the cows, when no longer valuable for milk—that is, when just on the point of dying—are butchered and sold in the city markets as number one beef.”427 This passage also illustrates the empathy that some news reports convey about the condition of the cows.

426 May 18, 1858.
Leslie’s pictorial representations certainly evoke sympathy for the plight of the cows, and this crossed over to news reports in other newspapers.

The New York dailies as well as newspapers around the country also reported on the ripple effect of Leslie’s pictorial exposé in other urban areas in the United States. For example, on June 5 the Herald reported that, “…the subject has already found its way into Cincinnati and Chicago, where the greatest excitement is now prevailing on account of the disclosures that have just been made in the cities. It appears that New York is not the only place where swill milk establishments flourish. The Western papers recommend the passage of State laws to prevent the keeping of cows on “whiskey slop.”

“Swill Milk Developments in Cincinnati” was the headline of a news brief on June 9 in the New York Times. They reported that the Cincinnati Gazette, “has commenced an exposure of the swill milk trade in that City,” noting that their investigation showed the same state of affairs as in New York. This same news brief also reported that the, “Chicago Journal has also made similar discoveries in its own locality.”

In fact, several reports about swill milk emerged in Chicago to the level of hyperbole and hearsay. For example, the Chicago Democrat reported that, “There are several persons in our city who supply families with milk, that have not a cow in the world. They manufacture milk from chalk and drugs.” Even a “first-class hotel” was accused of keeping “about a dozen cows that are fed on whisky slop.” No one can be sure

428 The New York Herald, June 05, 1858.
429 New York Daily Times, June 8, 1858.
430 Reprinted in the Massachusetts Spy, June 16, 1858.
where their milk comes from, since the paper reported that, “the most of the milk brought to the city from the country, it is said, comes from cows fed at distilleries.” The news stories read like rumor more than a factual reprint. Regardless, it is evidence that Leslie’s reportage struck a nerve in middle America as well.

In Boston, a farmer and not a journalist launched a swill milk investigation, according to news reports. The Cleveland Plain Dealer reported on “The Milk Trade in Boston” on May 26: “Apropos to the shocking ‘swill milk’ developments in New York City, the editor of the New England Farmer has devoted much labor to an investigation of the milk trade in Boston, and as a result he has gathered much interesting and valuable information.” The investigation revealed that the milk sold in Boston is watered down, and cream is removed. He said that his investigation raised “questions of importance, and concern to public health.” Adulterated milk is an economic issue as well, as he explains that people are still paying full price for what amounts to watered down milk. The reporter also made this notable observation: “In New York the milk is violated before it comes from the cow; in Boston afterwards.” In this discourse, not only do consumers need to worry about milk harvested from unhealthy cows, but there is also an added concern about secondary contamination of milk through adulteration.

The Scientific Community Weighs in on Swill Milk

Not only were the mainstream newspapers reporting on the swill milk investigation, but the professional medical journals also weighed in on the swill milk

431 Sandusky, Ohio Daily Commercial Register, June 8, 1858.
432 Cleveland Plain Dealer, May 26, 1858. Also reprinted in The Pittsfield Sun, June 03,1858.
question. Not a new topic to scientific reporting, publications like *Scientific American* had written about swill milk for years prior to *Leslie’s* pictorial expose in 1858. For example, in 1847 the magazine reported briefly among many items under “Home Compendium,” observing, “There is much controversy in our city papers regarding the impurity and unhealthiness of swill milk. There is one Swill Dairy in our city with 2000 cows. There is also much discussion regarding the weight of baker’s bread.” And now, in 1858, this journal had much more to say about swill milk, and about its devastating effects on the city: “The majority of our readers are, no doubt, aware that in the good city of New York, it has lately been for some time past that our lacteal beverage has been of the variety called ‘swill;’ and as this is not conductive to the bodily welfare of the inhabitants, the Board of Health set to work upon the milk question, no doubt, to ‘reform it all together.’” It seems that even this professional journal assumed that their readers had seen *Leslie’s*, or at least the news coverage that Leslie’s pictorial exposé launched.

Frank Leslie’s investigation seemed to motivate the medical journal to once again speak up against swill milk. The authors of a July 10, 1858 article in *Scientific American* maintain that the claims about swill milk being as nutritious as grass-fed cow’s milk is nonsense, explaining that the testimony of two doctors, Doremus and Chilton, was “in every way favorable to the swill milk.” It seems that those fighting the swill milk business did not have the $500 to pay for a new analysis of samples from slop- and grass-fed cows, so they used an old analysis by a Professor Reid performed several years

earlier. They observed that the investigation was, “surrounded as it was by so many personalities, and so much excitement,” and, “when our city officers—those appointed to guard the health of the city—sanction, with a few suggestions, the practice of the cowkeepers, we must protest.” While the analysis of the swill milk might show it to be chemically okay, the article explained that it cannot test for disease: “You cannot weigh, measure, and detect the germ of disease, as you do the lime in chalk, and any reasonable person can at once see that the milk of any animal fed upon an unnatural diet must be unhealthy and dangerous.”

They concluded that the Board of Health members were more concerned about the “sublime philanthropy” that outweighed the duties of their office. They wrote, and the popular press reported, that when the Board of Health scheduled an investigation of any city nuisance, such as swill milk stables, the authorities give the proprietors ample time to clean up the property. This obviously happened in the case of swill milk, the authors claim, “for they have not observed things which are to be seen everyday.” Echoing the narrative in the mainstream press, the scientific community also pointed the finger at big businesses’ powerful hold on corrupt city officials to “whitewashing” the problem of swill milk; any regular citizen knew it to be a true annoyance in the city.

Another scientific publication, the *American Veterinary Journal*, “devoted to the diffusion of veterinary knowledge,” enthusiastically, and a bit prematurely, said that Frank Leslie had rid the city of the “rascally practices of the swill-milk trade.”

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435 Ibid.
Continuing the narrative that Leslie was, more or less, a hero in the city the Journal, referred to Leslie as an “enterprising contemporary,” and reported that he performed a “great benefit to the city, and indeed to the communities of all the large cities in the United States through which his paper widely circulates.” The journal rightly pointed out that swill milk is a city issue, and it is interesting to note that they considered Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper as a known and familiar commodity. Dedicating two pages of their journal to discuss Frank Leslie’s efforts to abolish the swill milk industry, the author explained that Leslie and his reporter-artists were the subject of “malevolent rage of all of the swill-milk dealers” and, even worse, death threats. This article reprinted a long segment from Leslie’s in the May 8 issue that described the history of swill milk and its problems in New York, how the cows were riddled with disease, and the ineffective inoculation technique that caused the cow’s tails to eventually fall off. The journal reported that this passage, “furnishes a correct idea of the sources from which our city children, who are brought up largely fed on purchased milk, are poisoned and put to death.” Following the long passage from Leslie’s, it is explained that “copious illustrations” accompanied the text, “showing the conditions of the wretched animal in the pens… and those who look through these sickening pictures, will not wonder at the deep impression which the exposure undertaken by Mr. Leslie, has made upon the public’s mind.”

Based on what was studied from the scientific community, their official journals continued the narrative that swill milk was a city problem, that it was a huge nuisance in the city, and it was a poisonous substance that killed, especially small children. These journals also had no problem naming Frank Leslie as a champion of the people, crediting him for finally garnering enough attention from the public in the hope to rid the city of swill milk. And, like the mainstream press, the official scientific journals made accusations of political corruption associated with swill milk as a big business. The level of optimism varied regarding whether or not swill milk would be put to an end; those fighting the swill milk industry would hardly know how many more years it would take before “swill” from distilleries would be used as the only form of nourishment for dairy cows.

**Markets Disrupted**

According the news accounts, Frank Leslie’s pictorial exposé also crashed the dairy trade; milk sales became abysmal almost overnight. The reports about Leslie’s illustrations in other newspaper undoubtedly contributed to the disruption of agriculture markets as well. In New York, it was reported that consumers all over the cities of New York and Brooklyn turned milk carts away. In the “Miscellany” section of the Vermont Chronicle’s May 25 edition, a headline read “No Sale for Bad Milk.”⁴³⁷ They report that, “The milk agitation in New York has resulted in the right way.” The Chronicle and several other papers reported that 500 gallons of milk went unsold the week before and

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⁴³⁷ The Boston Investigator ran the exact same report, word for word, on May 26.
was returned to their respective stables in Brooklyn. The milk market woes had a domino effect on related markets. Leslie’s exposé not only weakened the milk trade, but his reports affected the cattle markets and milk-related products as well. It was widely reported that the swill milk cows were sick and full of ulcers, and once the cows died they were sold off to butchers and pedaled as “Grade A” meat. In the Herald’s commercial section, they reported that, “It is rumored, and perhaps with some truth, that the swill milk business having become unprofitable, the diseased cows have been slaughtered and are sold to the retail hucksters.” The Herald warned, “Beware of fat, black, cheap beef.” In an account of the markets on May 20, the Herald printed, “There prevails a moderate demand for milk cows at lower prices. There were some miserable cows on sale this week, which might readily be mistaken for some of Frank Leslie’s swill milk’ cows, so wretched did they look.”

The correspondent for San Francisco filed another report concerning the economic effects of Leslie’s investigation: “Excitement about the milk business continues to pervade the city” and reported that the committee is, despite undertaking a seemingly hard-working investigation, “whitewashing the business.” The correspondent noted that swill milk is a big industry is an “institution,” and individuals involved in the investigations have interests in the swill milk business. It continues to say that whitewashing is happening despite the Academy of Medicine’s passage of a series of resolutions and declaring that swill milk is “unhealthy and the cause of a large proportion

\[438\] The New York Herald, May 20, 1858. 207
of the in fact mortality in the city.” However, the report has not lost all hope, reporting that, “in the meantime, Leslie and his artists are continuing the good work of exposure: and the trade in cows is paralyzed…”

The press continued its suspicion of swill milk dealers, and this was evident in their news coverage. The *Lowell Daily Citizen and News* reported on a scam conducted by an unnamed New York swill milk dealer that had reportedly lost nearly all of his business, “in consequence of the recent developments about swill-milk.” This swill milk dairy owner allegedly released his cows into a pasture so they could eat clover, and then invited people to come and see the pasture cows and sample their milk. Commenting on those customers who attended, the reported claimed that not “a more satisfied company never returned from a feast” and “orders for milk flowed in.” Cows were returned to distillery — milk business is now operating “prosperously and profitably, as usual.”

It seems that a few weeks would pass before the milk market began to stabilize, thanks in part to the uptick for the “pure country milk” from producers outside of the city. Under a Cows and Calves heading, the *Herald* reported on August 12 that markets are moderately active, as there are big orders for Long Island. The demand for country fed milk was palpable, and the large number of milk carts branded “country milk” did not go unnoticed by a critical and suspicious press. “Orange county milk,” the *Herald* reported

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440 June 12, 1858.
and explained that “people look with suspicion on every single wagon; hence the increased demand from Long Island.”

*Street Literature, Advertising and Popular Talk about Swill Milk*

*Oh, Mother’s, be careful and caution*

*What milk for your children you buy,*

*Be careful ‘tis not the swill poison*

*That’s sold in some carts that drive by.*

Chorus from “Swill Milk No. 2”

“Swill Milk No. 2” was credited to G.W. Anderson and printed at 38 Chatham Street in New York by J. Andrews, likely in 1858 or 1859. It was printed as a song sheet, sometimes referred to as a broadside, part of the larger “street literature” culture in the nineteenth century. Street literature would have been accessible print material to all classes — “the free history books of the streets” as the author of *The History of Street Literature* explains. Before the development of recording technologies, sheets of music with lyrics were printed for people to learn and sing in groups. Song sheet or broadsheet ballads were typically a one-page, typeset sheet with lyrics to a traditional or topical song, often decorated with a border engraving or a simple woodcut. Song sheets offered a “unique perspective on the political, social, and economic life of the time,” according to the Library of Congress’ web site dedicated to the cultural practice of

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441 The *New York Herald*, August 12, 1858.
442 The dates provided indicate 1853-1859.
444 Ibid.
nineteenth century singing and song sheets. Lyrics were written without a musical score and were often sung to familiar songs such as “Yankee Doodle.” Song sheets covered everything from silly love songs, such as “Kiss Me Quick and Go,” to cultural commentary like “The Irishman’s Shanty.” At the height of their popularity during the Civil War, song titles such as “God Help Kentucky” and “The Devil’s Visit to ‘Old Abe’” were a part of the song sheet scene.

“Swill Milk No. 2,” while seemingly a light, humorous song, could have also been used to help the greater cause of abolishing swill milk stables in the city. As Leslie Shepard explains, “For more than three centuries the major struggles of politics and religion were mirrored in the street ballad-sheets and news pamphlets.” It stands to reason that a song devoted to swill milk is evidence of the topic capturing the public’s attention.

The fact that “swill milk” inspired a broadside ballad, a popular print form, is testament that swill milk was on the minds of many. The chorus suggested a warning to mothers. The lyrics pay homage to the news reports:

Kind folks, to my song you will listen,
While into your minds I will instill,
The news that has spread through our City,
About Milkmen who are selling us swill.

The ballad also noted the many news reports of swill milk as poison:

Of the news in the papers I’ve read,
About poisonous milk we are drinking.

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And swill milk disproportionally affected the poor, and killed the city’s infants and children:

*There’s many a poor mother, with sorrow,*  
*Has wept for her child that is dead*  
*While others I hope will take warning*  
*Whom with swill milk every morning is fed.*

Similar to the newspaper culture during this period, broadsides were interwoven with vast social changes in this age of industrialization. This ethos is reflected in the types of broadsides available to the public. The tradition of street literature has a long history that extends back to its European roots, but the print culture of nineteenth-century America cemented the tradition as a form of mass communication.

Another type of broadside that might be categorized as a “handbill” or a “street notice” occupied a similar space as the ballad broadside. One broadside, dated 1859, likely distributed in Brooklyn and New York read, “Pure Country Milk, and Nothing More or Less… For the Supply of Unadulterated and Unmixed Cows Milk.” Authored by the Rockland County and New Jersey Milk Association, they pledged to “sell nothing but a genuine, pure and healthy article” and extended an invitation to the public to examine their facilities, taste samples of their milk, and requested testimonials from “medical men” and customers regarding the quality of their product. The bill, like a flyer one might find under the windshield wiper of a car today, also included pricing and described their processing and delivery methods. The document’s thoroughness aimed to quell any concerns about the authenticity of the association’s claims. And while swill milk was not named directly in this broadside, there is no doubt that this printed piece was aimed at
generating business from customers who believed that swill milk was poisonous and killed. This broadside advertisement is an example of what might be thought of as an early public relations campaign intended to manage the damage to the milk industry by all of the negative media coverage.

Swill milk also found its way into popular satire. A writer for the Cleveland Plain Dealer, Charles Brown, known as a “jovial fellow with a genial wit,” was inspired by Leslie’s pictorial exposé to create a character that pursued his own crusade against swill milk. On occasion, Browne would author letters to the editor, “sometimes genuine and sometimes not,” according to James Edward Caron, author of Mark Twain: Unsanctified Newspaper Reporter. In one of Browne’s satirical efforts, a letter to the editor appeared in the Plain Dealer from a citizen who took it upon himself to investigate the swill milk problem in his own, rural community. Under the heading “Swill Milk in the Country,” a letter from Noggs Gogstopple, a Squawbush man, reported on his investigation with his local sheriff and a doctor about a neighbor who owned a “stump-tailed” cow. A self-identified Justice of the Peace, Gogstopple explained how he gathered his family to explain the “evils that were likely to fall upon the country from the use of swill milk.” Saying he had read about swill milk in the Buffalo Republic, he felt compelled to act upon his instincts and conduct an investigation of rumored swill milk cows in his vicinity. The letter continues, saying that Gogstopple felt that the swill milk problem was a threat to the nation: “I hinted distantly [to his family] at a revival of the

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446 J.E. Caron, Mark Twain: Unsanctified Newspaper Reporter (University of Missouri, 2008), 55.
447 The writer explains in the letter that Squawbush is located “in the heart of the Buffalo Reservation.
slave trade and the dissolution of the Union.” Caron explains that Brownes satirical characters were often used to “symbolize a middle-class, egalitarian, American point of view about how people should behave,” and this piece on swill milk is no exception.

The presumably fabricated letter by Browne from Gogstopple takes the swill milk problem to the extreme and taps into the ethos of the day: concern over the widening gap between the slave and non slave-holding states.

On June 7, in their City Intelligence section, the New York Herald reported on what might amount today as another public relations endeavor: “A pure milk procession passed the Herald office on Saturday, consisting of fourteen newly painted milk wagons, each containing bright cans, drawn by a good looking horse, and labeled ‘Pure Westchester County Milk.’ A four horse team carrying a band of music and a banner bearing the inscription, ‘Perseverance and Pure Milk with Prosper’, preceded them. The establishment caused quite a sensation, and the boys took the occasion to vociferate ‘swill milk’ [to the] discomfort of the proprietor.” By early June, city inhabitants would understand — thanks to the news coverage from Leslie’s and other newspapers — that many swill milk carts falsely advertised that they sold only “pure country milk.” The shouts from the crowd reported by the Herald suggest that the public remained skeptical that the milk would ever be the genuine product.

*Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* had no affiliation with a political party, which would otherwise have provided financial support for his publication. Leslie made

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448 June 14, 1858.
money through street sales and subscriptions to his pictorial newspaper. He also supplemented this paper with the sales of his other publications, sometimes as many as ten publications at once, such as women’s magazines and miscellanies. Advertising sales would be another avenue for sales. During his swill milk exposé, the advertising sections in *Leslie’s* reflected a noticeable change in milk-related advertising. Hotels, saloons and milk distributors all took out space to inform the public in what was clearly an effort to distance themselves from the swill milk now rumored to kill. The ads that first appeared were a direct address to Leslie himself, but appeared as what we would now recognize as a classified style of advertising. For example, one ad read: “Mr. Leslie—I was not aware that I was using Swill Milk until informed through your paper. I have given it up and am now selling pure Orange Country milk. [signed] J. Hartigan, No. 3 Second Street.” It is safe to assume that J. Hartigan likely saw that his address was listed among those that Leslie identified as an establishment receiving swill milk.

“Mitchell & Blain” of the “16 Fulton Market” also wrote a short note to Leslie that appeared in this same section on the back page. “We have changed our milkman” he stated, “and now use none but the best Country Milk.” Dairies also purchased advertising space in Leslie’s, such as Lawrence McBride of Ridgewood Dairy in Cypress Hill. This ad read, “earnestly invites his customers and all others wanting pure grass fed Country Milk, to visit his Dairy, at the above location, and assure themselves this his is

451 May 15, 1858.
452 Ibid.
not swill milk.” Ads were still found in Leslie’s classified two months after his initial swill milk edition. With this example from the Astor House, while they do not name “swill milk” directly, it is obviously written to quell any fears their customers may have about the substance: “All milk used here comes from a farm carried on for the sole and express purpose of furnishing MILK, VEGETABLES, POULTRY, EGGS and PORK to this hotel. The Cow’s fed in winter on the best of Hay and Meal, in summer on rich Pastures and Meal only.”

In Leslie’s May 15 issue, Fowler & Wells on 308 Broadway in New York advertised the sale of John Mullaly’s book The Milk Trade in New York and Vicinity. Explaining in the ad that the book provides an “account of pure and adulterated milk,” say the book is “filled with facts and figures respecting the Milk Trade, can be had for twenty five cents.” Mullaly’s book, of course, is the book Leslie heavily cites in his reporting on swill milk. The owners of Fowler & Wells obviously recognized an opportunity to directly advertise the now very interested public in more information about the swill milk business.

Although none of the mainstream newspapers took a strong stance against Leslie’s reporting on swill milk stables, it did not prevent them from taking advertising money from publications that did. Readers might not have known what to believe had they read page 5 of the New York Herald on May 20, 1858. “Swill Milk Humbug” headlines one advertisement for the New York Picayune, a satirical publication featuring

453 May 22, 1858.
cartoon content, published by Woodward & Co., according to the Library of Congress’ “Chronicling America” online archive. Frank Luther Mott explains that the Picayune was a comic periodical that found comedy more profitable to peddle than its original intent, being founded “to advertise Dr. Richard B. Hutchings Dyspepsia Bitters, and the jokes which had been inserted to carry the advertising proved more successful in curing dyspepsia than the bitters.” The advertisement that appeared in the Herald on May 20 challenged the reports about swill milk as poison, and went after Leslie personally: “Expose of Frank Leslie” and promised letters from milk dealers, and caricatures of Leslie. And if one looks a few spaces above this ad, they would have seen this: “Look and see if your number, as taking swill milk, is published in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated paper this week.” And directly below the Leslie’s advertisement: “Murder Will Out—See the expose of Frank Leslie, with letters from milk dealers in this week’s Picayune.”

Cheap entertainment for a large number of New Yorkers came in the form of the theater, and these institutions did not pass up the opportunity to capitalize on the scandalous news about swill milk. While unable to afford the higher costs of balls and king in the theater, even those “most destitute could afford an occasional night out at one of the modestly priced theaters on the Bowery or Chatham Street,” explains Tyler Anbinder, author of *Five Points: The 19th-Century New York City Neighborhood That*

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Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum.456

And so, it is reasonable to assume that those who were subject to the dangers of swill milk would have taken in the theater from time to time. And the theater community wasted no time turning the “swill milk excitement” into an opportunity to make money. As early as May 16, an advertisement for the Bowery Theater read:

SEFTON’S BENEFIT—BOWERY THEATER
TUESDAY EVENING, May 18
THE SLEDGE DRIVER
POOR OF NEW YORK
New Farce,
SWILL MILK,
MARBLE STATUES

Presenting swill milk as a farce was a comedic take on swill milk. While the content of the “Swill Milk farce” is likely lost to history, one could speculate that the farce helped relieve the stress of what was otherwise a very serious topic. Or, as Anbinder remarks, the “working-class theatergoers most loved to see themselves portrayed on stage.”457 And swill milk would certainly have spoken to their everyday experiences. Defined by Webster’s Dictionary as a “light dramatic work in which highly improbable plot situations, exaggerated characters, and often slapstick elements are used for humorous effect”, a farce could have been a social commentary on the news reports, akin to political satire. Today, television programs such as Saturday Night Live or The Daily Show, and the satirical newspaper The Onion might be a fair analogy. A show at

456 Anbinder, Five Points: The 19th-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum, 188.
457 Ibid., 189.
The Bowery Theater in 1858 would have catered to an immigrant population in a neighborhood dominated by Irish and Germans.\textsuperscript{458} And as late as March of 1860, an advertisement for the Broadway Boudoir listed “Jemmy, a swill milk swineherd” credited to G. Wilkinson as one of the attractions.\textsuperscript{459} The Broadway Boudoir, listed as located at 414 Broadway, between Grand and Canal Streets, would have been offering, “light comedy, farce, vaudeville and burlesque” in the spring of 1860.\textsuperscript{460} Knowing that the theater was lighter side of show business, one can cautiously speculate on the use of the name “Jemmy” as meaning something more than just a nickname for James. The \textit{Oxford English Dictionary} identifies a historical meaning of “a dandy or fop; a finical fellow,” and also a slang for a burglar’s crowbar. Further evidence suggests its comedic tone, as the advertisement was placed between notices for “Barnum’s American Museum” and “Bryant’s Minstrels.”

Finally, the phrase “swill milk” was found strategically used as a catchword in unrelated news items to emphasize something corrupt or immoral. William Lloyd Garrison’s high-minded, anti-slavery paper \textit{The Liberator} reprinting a quip about swill milk: in a story criticizing the Boston \textit{Courier’s} reporting on the Women’s Rights convention in New York appeared, the reporter set the tone immediately by calling the convention a “half melancholy, half ludicrous spectacle.” It was suggested that the women were very serious and did not take kindly to a speaker’s remark that, “Mr.

\textsuperscript{458} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{459} The \textit{New York Herald}, March 13, 1860.
\textsuperscript{460} As described in the book, \textit{Nineteenth Century American Women Theater Managers}, 95.
Swackhamer ‘went in’ for the repeal of all laws obnoxious to women, and the arrest of all dealers in swill milk.\footnote{June 4, 1858.} According to reporter Swackhamer’s comments, “were construed as fun-poking,” and his remarks were “dubiously received.” It is certainly a curious comment, and illustrates the intertextual use of “swill milk” in something as seemingly unrelated as a conference on women’s rights. But on the other hand, were Swackhamer’s comments reflecting the day’s discourse that often target women, such as the aforementioned popular song that warned women to be “careful and cautious” about swill milk?

Boston’s *The Congressionalist* reprinted a statement made by the Reverend Dr. Cheever at the American Missionary Association where he equated swill milk with slavery in a speech: It was not enough to call slavery a moral evil, it needed to be labeled, in no uncertain terms, a sin. “If slavery were not a sin,” the reporter wrote, interpreting the Reverend’s speech, “we had not an inch of ground to stand on.” And in a seeming outburst, the reverend was reported as communicating, “What were the moral duties connected with the swill-milk distillery—simply to see that the carts are painted with the names “Goshen” or “Cannon,” or some other locality of the pure article, and driven by some of the most godly deacons of the church? It would do for you to think of *abolishing* swill-milk. You would be called a radical abolitionists!!！”\footnote{June 4, 1858.}

Frank Leslie himself could not miss an opportunity to insert a comment about swill milk in his other reporting. A June 19 feature article appearing on the front page
titled “Summer Watering-Places,” includes talks about places for city inhabitants to escape the summer heat, and advice on how to stay cool: “Now is the time for strawberries (without milk or cream, in these swill times), and peas, and other luscious fruits and vegetables.” Associating swill milk with summer activities was an intertextual opportunity for Leslie to remind his readers of the social impact caused by his pictorial exposé. And if the reference was not obvious, readers would also encounter three more swill milk engravings in this very issue, this time featuring a “Swill Cow Stable” in Williamsburg.

Conclusion

New York City was not short on big news events during the spring and summer of 1858: the successful cable-laying of the first trans-Atlantic telegraph, city leaders breaking ground on New York’s Central Park, and the Eighth National Woman’s Rights Convention convening in May of that year in the city at Mozart Hall, for example. But in retrospect, it seems that the reaction to Leslie’s swill milk engraving was by no small measure just the “talk of the town.” This “talk” spread to other parts of the country, thanks to correspondents in New York writing for other newspapers, and the common practice of reprinting content from other newspapers. It also spurred investigations of swill milk dairies in other states.

Representations of swill milk in the wider culture, from satirical theater to popular songs, suggest that swill milk was very much on the minds of mid-century citizens. In

463 Leslie’s. June 19, 1858.
some cases, Leslie’s sensational methods to report the story likely prompted cultural critiques, such as the Noggs Gogstopple character created by the Cleveland Plain Dealer. Although public opinion polling as it is known today did not exist, the widespread reporting on swill milk in newspapers across the country is another indicator that the problem received a great deal of public attention.\textsuperscript{464 }

Many newspapers, the scientific press and popular culture in New York all continued the story about swill milk beyond Leslie’s pictorial reportage. The dominant narrative constructed a stark milk binary: whereas country milk was pure and wholesome, the city-produced swill milk was pure poison and a society evil. Swill milk killed thousands of children every year, and Frank Leslie had done a great service to the community by providing new and startling information about the cause of death in the city. Leslie’s work was a much-needed public service, despite the fact that the problem was nothing new. The illustrations appear to have done what words along could not — capture the public’s attention and spark outrage.

John Duffy’s research on New York’s public health history treats the swill milk problem as a struggle between the reform-minded medical community against indifferent city officials and the “big business” of swill milk. Prior to Leslie’s expose, he says that, “every other medium of communication were filled with nauseating and grim descriptions of the conditions under which the cows were kept.”\textsuperscript{465 }While Duffy does not cite the myriad of communications that allegedly kept the swill milk issue in front of the

\textsuperscript{464} Brown, Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America, 44. \textsuperscript{465} Duffy, A History of Public Health in New York City 1625-1866, 430.
public, he does cite Greeley’s *Daily Tribune*, where claims were made in 1854 that swill milk could be blamed for at least 9,847 deaths of children less than two years of age.\footnote{466}{Ibid.}

On one hand, it is incredible that the method of swill-fed cows for milk production was allowed to continue in the city for as long as it did. One has to ask, if “swill milk” had been presented as a problem through various media prior to Leslie’s illustrated portrayals of this industry, why was the problem more or less ignored until *Leslie’s* 1858 exposé? By using a historical lens, the swill milk problem becomes an example of the human and industrial fallout caused by the growing power of mass industry when it clashed with government apathy. Before Leslie’s pictorial reports, Michael Egan explains that the “wealthy city-dwellers, who possessed the social and political power to present a stringent challenge to the legislators’ political hegemony that would have facilitated the mounting of a more effective campaign against swill milk interests, were in the process of insulating themselves from the urban poor.”\footnote{467}{Egan, “Organizing Protest in the Changing City: Swill Milk and Social Activism in New York City, 1842–1864,” 209.} But by 1858, a rising middle class who had little time for corruption and a crowding city would limit the elite’s ability to shelter themselves; this would make swill milk an issue difficult to ignore much longer. But another way to interpret this is Leslie starting a new public dialogue about swill milk by putting gruesome images in front of the public to see, week after week.
The height of news coverage on swill milk happened in early May and continued through the summer and fall of 1858. It should be noted that, in 1859, the Mayor Tiemann requested a new, independent investigation of swill milk to be conducted by the New York Academy of Medicine. Leslie’s reported on this investigation that resulted in some additional illustrated content that appeared in April of 1959, but this reportage would not compare to the onslaught of images he put in front of the public in 1858. Furthermore, while Frank Leslie was highly praised for exposing in pictures the swill milk business, he also made some enemies.

The next chapter examines the news coverage and the aftermath of city investigations that were sparked by Leslie’s pictorial exposé. Leslie would be arrested not once, but twice, for criminal libel — allegedly harming Aldermen Reed and Tuomey for images he published in his newspaper. Furthermore, not all in the mass press were convinced that Leslie’s efforts were purely altruistic. Some accused him of exploiting the swill milk issue for his own personal gain. There were those who rejected the “swill milk is poison” and defended swill milk as healthier than milk from grass fed and farm-raised cows from the country. This narrative emerges in the coverage when the “swill milk committee” launches a full-scale investigation of the industry in New York and Brooklyn.
Chapter Six: “Whitewashed!” The Special Committee, the Press and Cartoons as Criminal Libel

The evidence now published bears entirely against the swill milk interests. With such printed facts staring them in the face, they cannot decide in favor of continuing the nuisance, unless they are themselves forsworn and callous to every sense of honor justice and humanity.

Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, July 17, 1858.

The writer of this editorial — possibly Frank Leslie himself — is suggesting that the overwhelming evidence against the swill milk business should leave any decent human being with no choice but to put an end to “the nuisance.” One immediate impact of Leslie’s pictorial crusade against swill milk concerns the special committee appointed to investigate the revived, or to some, the new allegations that Leslie’s illustrations brought to light. This chapter presents the press coverage that ensued upon the commencement of an official municipal committee that the mayor tasked with investigating the swill milk business.

The previous chapter examined and interpreted the reaction to Frank Leslie’s swill milk exposé in the press, advertising and popular culture. Leslie’s pictorial campaign continued for months, but it only took his first issue to make enough of an impact for bureaucrats to take notice. The attention paid to Leslie’s grotesque and abundant illustrations gave city officials little choice but to investigate the swill milk stables, and it was widely reported that New York’s Mayor Tiemann requested the first
investigation in May of 1858 after he met with Frank Leslie himself.\textsuperscript{468} This chapter reports the research that reveals a press that was suspicious of city government and its ability to conduct an unbiased investigation. In what seems like a “cat and mouse game,” municipal officials were well aware of the public’s distrust, and in an effort to stave off criticism, produced a 300-page report of their findings as evidence of their investigative thoroughness.

Dubbed the “Swill Milk Committee” in the press, the first news reports on the Mayor’s appointment of a special committee to investigate swill milk reflected phrase and high hopes that the city would break up the business and rid the city of the large-scare swill milk dairies once and for all. But, the press soon lost its enthusiasm. Ultimately, the committee’s light-handed decision (to be detailed later) drew condemnation across the media of “whitewashing” the serious swill milk problem. Certain Aldermen were accused of taking bribes from the swill milk stable owners, and the Mayor was criticized for appointing a biased, corrupt committee. At least two journalists were arrested for criminal libel, one being Frank Leslie, who was sent to the city’s notorious prison, the Toombs jail, on at least one occasion. However, there were those who doubted Frank Leslie’s sincerity; these dissenters accused Leslie of exploiting the swill milk issue for his own personal gain. Swill milk proprietors themselves used the media as a platform to defend their product in what could be understood as an early “crisis management” public relations campaign. Some swill milk proprietors went so far

\textsuperscript{468} New York Daily Times, May 12, 1858.
as to claim that cows fed on swill produced a more nutritious drink than pasture-raised, grass-fed cows.

**Reporting on the “Special Committee” Investigation**

Not surprisingly, when the “City Fathers” ordered the inspection and investigation of the swill milk stables in New York and Brooklyn, reporting on the swill milk business in the city increased. This was especially apparent, not surprisingly, in New York’s daily papers. It seems that once the Mayor Tiemann and the Board of Health set up a Special Committee to investigate, the allegations that swill milk was “pure poison” and was responsible for killing thousands of infants children every year was a serious news topic. On May 21, the *Herald* told readers that, “The Health Commissioners held a meeting yesterday afternoon at the Mayor’s office, but no business was transacted. Some debate ensued regarding the swill milk business, when Mayor Tiemann stated that it was his determination to call a special meeting of the Board of Health upon the subject.” But the Times on May 22 ran a more positive article, explaining that the Board of Health and the mayor were working together. Calling it a “long-neglected duty,” the *Times* reported on the cooperation: “They [the Board of Health] have agreed with Mayor Tiemann that the swill milk nuisance must be abated.” The New York *Times* dedicated several column inches with the latest news on “Swill Milk and Infant Mortality.” The article refers to the enormous problem of falsely advertising swill as “Pure Orange County Milk” and, with a dig on political leadership, asserted that “no sane man, not even a City Inspector, can any longer doubt” that “swill milk is detrimental to the public health.” When the *Herald*
reported that the special committee has been appointed to investigate swill milk, the writer of the announcement could not resist editorializing, remarking that, “with the view of mitigating to some extent, if possible, the evils that flow from a use of that abominable fluid.” Is this reporter suggesting that the city will be involved in some kind-of cover up?

On the next day, May 26, the Herald ran a brief announcement titled “Board of Health” that reported on the Mayor’s motives to commence an investigation at a Board of Councilman meeting. The mayor had been asked by numerous citizens to investigate, and a list of physicians had also communicated with him. Many doctors claimed that swill milk business was “injurious to the public health, and the cause of over half of the deaths among children.” The Mayor, therefore, was requesting that the Board of Health “have it [swill milk] properly investigated by a special committee.” And with little controversy, a resolution was proposed and passed to appoint a special committee consisting of the Board of Health members to investigate swill milk.

It is also interesting to note that a group of cattle owners tried to stay ahead of the charges against them in Leslie’s by sending a letter to the daily papers to publicize their plea for the municipality to investigate. Signed by the owners of cows housed in one of the swill milk establishments exposed by Leslie’s, the New York Herald reprinted a letter dated in their May 20 issue. In this letter the cattle owners asked Mayor Tiemann to send

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469 May 25, 1858.
470 The New York Herald, May 26, 1858. In the same article, a communication was submitted from a group of citizens complaining about a “fat burning” facility as a nuisance.

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authorities to inspect the stable, “at the foot of Sixteenth street, North river.” They said that they have “seen several articles reflecting on us in a print called Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, which articles are calculated to prejudice the public against us.” The request a “full examination and report” from the city on the condition of their stables, and they point to scientific evidence to exonerate the claims that swill milk “produces injurious articles of milk.” Leslie’s first issue on swill milk had been out for nearly two weeks at this point — and likely more than enough time to move sick cows out and clean up the stables to be presentable for a passable inspection.

By today’s standards, the investigation timeline is impressive. The Board of Health organized a committee to investigate roughly three weeks after Leslie’s first issue devoted to swill milk went public. Called the “Special Committee of the Board of Health,” but soon after dubbed the “Swill Milk Committee” in the press, five city leaders were appointed by the Mayor to investigate. They were: Alderman Michael Tuomey, chairman of the committee, Alderman E. Harrison Reed, Alderman William Tucker; and city Councilmen Charles H. Haswell and James H. Cross. The committee was responsible for inspecting stables, collecting samples of milk for a chemical examination, and gathering testimony from the distillery-stable owners, their workers and other interested parties. But it appears that popular opinion, strongly promoted in Leslie’s paper, felt that the swill milk properties had been cleaned up before

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471 Reading the Majority and Minority Report testimony, testimony indicates that the cows housed in these swill milk stables had multiple owners. It seems that space was leased to multiple owners.
472 The New York Herald, May 20, 1858.
473 Some of this information was gathered from an 1878 article written about Tuomey in the October 29 issues of the New York Daily Times.
they were inspected. The *Times* reported on May 28, with certainty, “The swill milk has been whitewashed, their hopelessly diseased cows having been slaughtered and sent to market, and about half the rest of their live stock sent out to graze, the Committee of the Board of Health yesterday made their first visit to such of them that they were invited to inspect.” No reporters accompanied the Committee, the article noted, and asked if the Committee would “ply the whitewash brush” to their report just as the “swill-milk makers” had to their stables. The article makes sarcastic notations of what it would be like to give a robber amble time to plan and execute a robbery, much like the city gave the swill milk owners more than enough time to clean up their stables before inspection. And, continuing the “swill-milk-is-poison” narrative, the article cites the commonly stated statistic that 8,000 children died from consuming swill milk during the previous year.

Commenting on the Special Committee’s visit to the swill milk stables, the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* said that, “The swill-milk excitement in New York City had done a good thing. It has cleaned out many of the diseased cows and taught the villainous milkmen that their operations in cheating and poisoning the public have about played out.” However, because it seems that cows were cleared out and stables were cleaned prior to inspection, the “cows with many sores” were gone because the stables had all been recently “whitewashed.” They added, sarcastically, “Great place, that New York City.”

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474 Cleveland *Plain Dealer* May 29, 1858.
**Testimony from Medical Community**

The secondary literature on the 1858 swill milk investigation says that this initial criticism prompted a second investigation. According to Michael Egan, the first investigation was interpreted in the press as “too friendly with the swill milk dealers to provide a balanced report.” Although Egan’s timeline of events is incorrect in his essay, he is right in observing that the press’ reaction prompted the existing committee to collect a wider range of testimony from not only the swill milk proprietors, but also from physicians, scientists, and any citizen who wished to have their comments on record. The New York dailies dedicated reporters to covering the public hearings held to investigate the “deleterious nature” of swill milk.

As the Committee’s work commenced, announcements were published in the local papers to solicit expert testimony. On June 8 the *Herald* ran a notice signed by all five swill milk committee members that announced the next meeting. They requested that, “All physicians who have sent communications to his Honor the mayor in relation to this subject, and who have not appeared before the committee, are required to attend.” The following week, a general advertisement appeared: “All persons desirous of being heard before the Committee in opposition to the sale of swill milk to our citizens are hereby notified attend at the above mentioned time and place.”

The Swill Milk Committee collected testimony from physicians who were known opponents of swill milk, swill “milkmen” and a chemist who had been hired to analyze

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475 The *New York Herald*, June 14, 1858.
milk from cows fed on grass and cows fed on swill. As experts, both physicians and chemists appeared before the committee. On June 7, the Herald reported that, “It will be seen that that while one physician testifies that in his opinion there is not a particle of deleterious matter in swill milk, another considers it one of the causes of the great infantile mortality of New York.” Whether or not swill milk was killing children was the crux of the issue, and the press set out to provide readers with information on the matter.

Papers outside of New York, such as the Philadelphia Inquirer, also reported on portions of the swill milk investigation hearings. Many of the brief reports were written in a way that one would have to know the back story in order to understand what they were talking about, which suggested that New York’s “swill milk question” was a much-discussed topic in certain parts of the country. Under New York news, a May 28 correspondent reported that the “Swill Milk Committee of the Board of Health” toured swill milk establishments and remarks that, “the condition of some was found to be disgusting in the extreme.” 476 And it was sympathetically reported that, “many of the poor Brindles were minus the ordinary caudal appendage,” in reference to the many swill-fed cows that lost tails as a result of botched inoculation efforts. The reporter indicates with punctuation his curiosity that missing tails indicated immunization from disease, because they needed to cut off the tail sometimes “in order to preserve the life of the animal ! !” 477 But we know that this method of inoculation did not work and their tails

476 Philadelphia Inquirer, May 28, 1858.
477 Ibid.
likely rotted off because they were cut open and inserted with diseased organs from dead cows.

An interesting parallel emerged during the height of the swill milk committee’s investigation: Swill milk merchants testified that swill milk was not only harmless, but in some ways healthier than pasture-raised, grass-fed cows. Better yet, swill milk even saved lives. “Swill-Milk As a Medicine” is the headline in a June 12, 1858 article in the Times reported Mr. Husted’s account of saving the life of a child by feeding him swill milk. The article reminded readers that Husted is the proprietor of one of the swill milk stables under investigation in Brooklyn and “could hardly be regarded as a disinterested witness.” Joking that Husted “must be considered the founder of a new school in medicine,” they report that Husted considered “grass-fed milk from the country… vastly inferior to the genuine stump-tailed article, manufactured at his stables in Skillman street.” Nobody was buying the argument that swill milk saved lives, and the Times is one example of many who challenged the credibility of a swill milk dealer defending his own product.

Counternarrative: Swill Milk Saves Lives!

The medical testimony collected by the Swill Milk Committee was a popular news item, perhaps in part because the scientific community did not always agree. The Herald summarized one day’s conflicting testimony succinctly for readers in this June 3 report: “Drs. John W. Francis and John H. Griscom gave strong testimony against swill milk. An analysis of Prof. Reid was submitted to prove that swill milk contained as much,
if not more, nutriment than country milk. It was alleged by milkmen that the cow
distemper is as prevalent in the country as in the swill milk stables. Dr. Griscom was
not a new face to the Board of Health. He had been involved in the city’s public health
initiatives since the 1820s, and a well-known advocate for uplifting the poor and
recommending protocols to prevent epidemics and promote the public’s health. Dr.
Francis, instrumental in the professionalization of medicine, was also a supposedly highly
credible witness. The analysis by Professor Lawrence Reid, as it turned out, was
several years old, and although the medical professionals testified to its accuracy, the age
of the report was enough to make this evidence less credible in linking the cause of swill
milk to killing children. It is unclear why new samples of swill milk were not collected
and analyzed to determine whether or not it was, as it was widely reported in the press,
“poison.”

On the Monday, June 7 front page of the Herald, in a summary of news, persons
would read a preview of this issue’s news items, including an “interesting report” about
the proceeding involving the swill milk committee. Commenting on testimony provided
by the medical community to the Swill Milk Committee, the Herald explained, “It will be
seen that that while one physician testifies that in his opinion there is not a particle of

478 The New York Herald, June 3, 1858.
479 Duffy, A History of Public Health in New York City 1625-1866, 171, 528-529.
480 Duffy, A History of Public Health in New York City 1625-1866, 236.
481 Scientific American, July 10, 1858. Scientific American reported that the minority did not have the money
to conduct a new test of milk.
deleterious matter in swill milk, another considers it one of the causes of the great infantile mortality of New York.\textsuperscript{482}

While a number of experts from the medical and scientific community testified on the poisonous qualities of swill milk, there was a minority of doctors who had no problem with swill. For example, a physician’s testimony reported in the June 7\textsuperscript{th} edition of the \textit{Herald} challenged the notion that swill milk was harmful. Dr. John Shanks, a member of the Academy of Medicine, offered his interpretation of the results of testing of swill milk by chemists, saying that it was likely “a little more indigestible.” When asked directly if he thought swill milk was responsible for the deaths of 8,000 children every year, he is quoted as saying, “Most certainly not; there’s not a single particle of truth in that statement.” He continued to say that swill milk contained less of many elements, such as “buttery particles” and other things found in the more desirable country milk, but, “the whole swill milk agitation has been based upon premises unsupported by a single fact.”

Dr. Shanks was not on board with the Academy of Medicine claim that swill milk was “deleterious.” Rather, he felt that the large number of deaths among children was either from the “nurses eating improper food or unripe fruit” or from “atmosphere influence.” “Most scientific men know it to be a humbug,” he concluded, saying that he lived near the swill milk stable and did not find the stables to be a nuisance, but rather liked the “pleasant, musky odor.”\textsuperscript{483}

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\textsuperscript{482} The New York \textit{Herald}, June 7, 1858.
\textsuperscript{483} New York Board of Health, \textit{Majority and Minority Reports of the Select Committee of the Board of Health: Appointed to Investigate the Character and Condition of the Sources from Which Cow's Milk Is Derived, for}
\end{flushright}
On June 3 the *Herald* reported that the professor’s analysis was submitted to the Board of Health’s special committee to “prove that swill milk contained as much, if not more, nutriment than country milk.” The report continues by explaining that, “It was also alleged by the milkmen that the cow distemper is as prevalent in the country as in the swill milk stables.”

In addition to press accounts revealing competing opinions about the nutritional value of swill milk, the papers also reported on comments by physicians and other expert regarding the cow’s horrible living conditions. Experts provided testimony on the condition of the cows in the stables and offered their interpretations of the scientific evidence provided by chemists who analyzed samples of the swill milk. The *Times* reprinted a “Certificate of Physicians on the Pernicious Properties of Slop-Milk” that was signed by 58 doctors from New York’s medical community. Referring to swill milk as “slop” milk, they say, is “extremely detrimental to the health, especially of young children, as it not only contains too little nutriment for the purposes of food, but appears to possess unhealthy and injurious properties, owing in part, probably, to the containment of the Cows and the bad air which they consequently have to breathe, as well as the unnatural and pernicious nature of the slop on which they are fed.”

Probably due to the living conditions of the cows in the overcrowded, poorly ventilated stables? That

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*Sale in the City of New York. Together with the Testimony and the Chemical and Microscopical Analyses of Milks. Also, Letters from Distinguished Physicians, &C., &C., &C* (CW Baker, printer, 1858).

484 The New York Daily Times, June 1, 1858.
hesitation is conspicuous, and leaves an opening to question the validity of the accusations that swill milk is harmful to one’s health.

The media coverage of the medical testimony continued. The *Times* headline on June 7 read, “The Swill Milk Investigation. The Doctors Disagree—Counsel Turned Out—Testimony of Dr. Shanks, Dr. Gardner, the City Inspector, Health Warden and others.” Much of the back-and-forth testimony reprinted revealed some confusion as to what the role of this special committee of the Board of Health should be. It amounted to whether these investigations were legal proceedings or just an inquiry to gather information. At the onset on the June 6 meeting described on June 7, the reporter said that, “the Chairman, Alderman Tuomney, said the Committee had been in consultation, and had concluded that as the investigation was one of fact and not of law, the was no need for counsel on either side.” But the “swill-men” as identified by the *Times*, like Mr. George Moore, protested the exclusion of counsel, since they were not there on their own, free will, and were being accused of killing 8,000 children. The *Times* also reported that Mr. Moore reminded the committee that the “swill-men” were not educated and therefore “not qualified for the preparation of suitable questions for such an investigation.” It was reported there that the committee moved on to asking Frank Leslie to take the stand; Leslie insisted that the City Inspector, Mr. Morton, take the stand, saying that the City Inspector is the “most important man to be examined in an investigation like this.” Leslie’s insistence that a “most important man” take the stand before he did is revealing. Leslie was a lightning rod, at odds with the swill milk
committee, and perhaps Leslie knew that his testimony would have little influence since a majority of committee members were presumably sympathetic to the swill milk industry.

A lengthy segment of testimony given to the Committee by City Inspector Morgan was reported in the *Times* article of June 7 which reprinted the testimony. The exchange revealed a similar pattern evident in testimony from the physicians and others testifying against the swill milk business. The committee members stressed that they wanted information that the witnesses knew first-hand, and not hearsay from what they had been told. “We want only what you know of your own knowledge,” Tuomey said to Morton at one point in their exchange. Questions to the medical community would also reflect this tenacity that demanded nothing but eyewitness testimony, which seemed to be more important than their interpretation as trained medical professionals. The following example illustrates the skeptical tone many of the interviews reflected when Dr. Francis was examined. The examination diverts into a conversation about butter, hardly a topic anyone would expect a physician to know about.

Tuomey: You don’t know this of yourself?

Francis: In relation to the subject of making butter I have to depend upon others.

Tuomey: You have no knowledge of it?

Francis: No sir, I never saw butter made; I am a New Yorker and never go to the country.

Reed: Are you through, doctor?
Francis (continuing): I believe it is familiarly known that the meat of those animals (the swill milk cows) is almost a poison… and I don’t believe any of you gentlemen of the Aldermanic board would be willing to live long on the substance derived from such flesh… I have written on the subject; others have, and I have not been an indifferent spectator. It is impossible that either the milk or the flesh of these animals can be nutritive.

Dr. Francis’ long response (edited above) seems to indicate that he understands that Aldermen Tuomey and Reed are questioning the authenticity and accuracy of his testimony. This is one example of many where Committee questions took on a combative tone, and did not reflect an impartial inquiry to gather information about swill milk. And Francis’ quip, “I am a New Yorker” could be interpreted as a verbal jab of some sort to the committee, stating his status as an established, sophisticated city man.

It was exchanges like this, witnessed and reported on in the press that likely put the swill milk committee on the defensive. The press reported that the public questioned the committee’s motives. Chairman Tuomey was reported as saying that, “the community had got the impression that the investigation was not proceeding fairly.” The whitewashing news reports of the swill milk stable inspections earlier in the month could not have helped the public’s opinion of the Special Committee.

Frank Leslie also questioned the committee’s intentions and, not surprisingly, became part of the story covered in the newspapers. In the published testimony gathered by the Select Committee of the Board of Health, otherwise known as the “Majority and Minority Reports,” it is reported that on the third day of collecting testimony from the public, a letter was Leslie submitted to the committee. Reprinted in the report, Leslie
expressed frustration with what he perceived as a biased collection of evidence. Leslie wrote that would not subject himself or the “distinguished medical witnesses” to question. He concludes, “I have done my duty in bringing this monstrous nuisance before the public; but in perceiving the utter impossibility of getting a just and unbiased hearing before the committee as now constituted, I shall decline proceeding further in conjunction with them.”

The committee responded by issuing a subpoena to Leslie for his testimony. The Herald reported on June 9 that Leslie himself would be summoned to appear before the committee investigating swill milk. A letter from Leslie was read at the Board of Health meeting the previous day, acknowledging the subpoena and explaining that he needed a few day’s notice to “state all that he is prepared to prove.” When Leslie did appear before the committee at the fifth meeting of the Special Committee on Thursday, June 10, 1858, the transcript reveals a long, prepared statement by Leslie, explaining his motivation to illustrate the swill milk trade. Influenced by what he had read in the papers about swill milk, the high rates of infant mortality in the city, and reports from the Academy of Medicine had all been factors contributing to his decision to investigate. He said that, “in order to satisfy myself of the correctness of my pictures and my statements, and I found that my pictures lacked force, for they could not depict the filth of the stables, their darkness and cobwebs, their close and feited[sic] air, and the sickening stench which

485 New York Board of Health, Majority and Minority Reports of the Select Committee of the Board of Health: Appointed to Investigate the Character and Condition of the Sources from Which Cow’s Milk Is Derived, for Sale in the City of New York. Together with the Testimony and the Chemical and Microscopical Analyses of Milks. Also, Letters from Distinguished Physicians, &C., &C., &C., 182.
pervaded the entire place. I saw and experienced all of this.”\(^{486}\) The published testimony includes a four-page statement by Leslie, including medical testimony that remark on the poor physical conditions of swill cows, affidavits from those whose children suffered from consuming swill milk, and a report on the condition of the stables from the Bureau of Sanitary Inspection.

Leslie was later questioned by the committee, from mundane questions about certain details in his swill milk engravings to his personal connection with the Pure Milk Company — an insinuation that he would personally profit if swill milk was abolished. Leslie explained that he had records in his office that he had sketches related to swill milk for years: “I intended to do it while I was connected with Barnum and Beach’s paper. I put the subject down, and that was four or five years ago.”\(^{487}\) Exchanges continued between Leslie and the committee members, particularly Tuomey and Tucker, as to whether or not the committee had thoroughly investigated the matter. Leslie, not surprisingly, felt their investigation was biased and incomplete: “I tell you what I can prove, and you say you wish to cut the investigation short,” Leslie chastised.\(^{488}\)

On June 16 the *Herald* updated readers on the final arguments presented to the committee about swill milk: “Seven or eight witnesses testified rather forcibly against the swill milk establishment on Sixteenth Street, but the evidence was merely a confirmation of previous testimony in relation to the subject. The committee declined another meeting

\(^{486}\) Ibid., 189.  
\(^{487}\) Ibid., 226.  
\(^{488}\) Ibid., 228.
to hear more witnesses against the swill, though requested to do so by the parties who originating the investigations.”

Perhaps the committee had heard enough and was unwilling to hear any further testimony from the public. But the Herald and others suggested that the committee’s decision to end testimony collection was against the will of the people. It is no wonder that the committee had sensed that they were being perceived as unfair earlier in the month.

A concern about the milk industry turning into an even bigger business was apparent in the reporting on the swill milk committee as well. Appearing in the June 4 issue, the Philadelphia Inquirer correspondent reported briefly on the physician and chemist reports, presumably presented to the Board of Health’s Special Committee. The correspondent said that these experts testified “relative to the effects of swill milk upon the human system” and how it had “decimated the children of this city during the last few years.” But what is particularly interesting about this correspondent’s report is this observation: “By the way,” he concluded, “somebody attributes the agitation on this subject to the ‘Black Republicans’ and ‘Know Nothings,’ in order to secure a monopoly of the milk trade for an American Milk Co., which has just been chartered, and warns the public against such a monopoly of the milk business by the Americans, as the consequences would be nothing short of 11 or 12 cents per quart.”

A 12-cent gallon of milk would be a 100% increase when compared with going rate of six cents per gallon.

489 The New York Herald, June 16, 1858.
490 Philadelphia Inquirer; June 4, 1858.
Direct references to political parties were not common, but present in some reporting on the swill milk hearings. Using the political labels “know nothings” and “black republicans” was a shortcut for anti-Irish and anti-Catholic sentiments. This accompanies the narrative that Leslie presented in the press about the dirty, poor Irish swill milk workers. The suggestion that political interests were vying to monopolize the milk business in New York was an observation about the larger trends in the city to move from cottage industries to larger, mass-scale manufacturing. Furthermore, it also played into the tensions between the North and the South. While we know that Northern ideology was against slavery as an institution, by no means did it mean that they embraced the black population as equal or welcome in their city. As James M. McPherson explains in *Drawn with the Sword: Reflections on the American Civil War*, during this period before the Civil War, Democrats would have been “telling their Irish-Americans constituents that the wicked Black Republicans were waging the war to free the slaves who would come north and take away the jobs of Irish workers.”

*Whitewashed! Reaction to the Majority and Minority Report*

Charles W. Baker, printer to the Common Council of New York City, took an order on June 28th from the Board of Health to print the report on the testimony gathered by the Board of Health’s swill milk committee. 5000 copies of the “Majority and Minority Reports of the Select Committee of the Board of Health” were printed and distributed that was a little over 300 pages in length. The majority opinion, signed by

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Aldermen Tuomey, Reed and Councilman Tucker, seemed to anticipate some pushback from the public on their decision. Thus, making the 300-page report available for the public was their effort to present their own version of “seeing is believing,” so to speak. In the report, those in the majority claimed that they went to great lengths to collect evidence to make their decision. Referencing Leslie’s pictorial exposé specifically, the introduction to the report made it clear that,

With respect to the representations made by Frank Leslie in his Illustrated Newspaper, [listing all of his accusations about swill milk, the condition of the cows and their stables], — your Committee are convinced that any opinion which we might give would prove altogether unsatisfactory to the Board of Health and the public. Hence they deem it unnecessary to enter into a lengthy exposition of their investigations, but conclude to submit in detail a verbatim short-hand report of all of the testimony elicited before them, together with several analyses of the milk and the swill made by the chemists… so that every person may judge for themselves, and the Board be enabled to take such action in the matter as it may deem most advisable.  

And their decision was this: The Committee tasked the City Inspector’s office to make sure the cow stables had “a perfect a system of ventilation through the ceilings and roofs,” and also to redesign the stables so each cow had a space “of not less than five feet in the clear.” Thus, the Committee’s investigation found nothing wrong with the milk these cows produced, but recommended some allowances to help the cows with space and ventilation. But it may be more instructive to observe what was absent from the resolution presented by the majority on the “swill milk’ committee: they found nothing

492 From the Majority and Minority report, as reprinted in the New York Daily Times, June 29, 1858.
wrong with the method of feeding cows only grain used in making liquor from the
adjourning distilleries, and the method by which the cows were later sold for their meat
was okay as well.

The Minority Report, conversely, provided a pointed discussion of the swill milk
industry, explaining that nature of swill milk operations are to first and foremost provide
the “greatest practical economy” for the owners. Charles Haswell is the only signature on
the Minority Report, so it is assumed that he is the author of the dissent. In the report
Haswell detailed the conditions of the stables, and explained what cows are fed, saying
that it mainly “residuum of grain, mixed with water, after its consistents [sic] essential to
alcohol distillation have been extracted.” The report also discussed how dying and dead
cows were disposed of, and stressed that even the cows that died from disease were also,
“dressed and exposed for sale.” Haswell also provided details to show that the swill milk
stables were a public nuisance and destroying natural resources. He explained that —
undoubtedly because of the cow’s limited diet — the manure is of a “semi-fluid” nature
that makes it impossible to clean the stables, and therefore a “large quantity of fecal
matter in combination with the husks of grain is discharged into the harbor of the City to
add to its destruction.”

In the minority report, Haswell also exhibited great contempt for those witnesses
appearing before the committee on behalf of the swill milk industry. He refers to some

493 New York Board of Health, Majority and Minority Reports of the Select Committee of the Board of Health:
Appointed to Investigate the Character and Condition of the Sources from Which Cow's Milk Is Derived, for
Sale in the City of New York. Togetherwith the Testimony and the Chemical and Microscopical Analyses of
Milks. Also, Letters from Distinguished Physicians, &C., &C., &C., 26.
witnesses, who were likely the many milkmen who testified, as “not only very uncleanly, but they are very frequently of a character too disgusting to be here referenced to” and skeptically remarked about those who claimed that swill-milk was, “fully equal, if not superior, to all other kinds.” A reference to Leslie’s pictorial exposé in relation to the swill milkmen, remarking on the claims in the press that the stables had ample time to clean up before the committee visited them for inspection: “It appeared also that within the time of the publication of a weekly paper of the alleged offensive practices at the distillery cow-stables of this City and Brooklyn, and the time of the visit of your Committee,” it is explained, that the “sudden removal of hundreds of cows” did not have a satisfactory explanation. The reader is left to infer that the cows were removed solely for the purpose of making the swill milk business appear to be tidy and reputable.

To a contemporary reader, Haswell’s disdain for the men working in the stables would be no surprise, as these were poor laborer of mostly Irish and German descent — a world apart from people of Haswell’s pedigree. Thanks to Leslie’s biographical sketch published in July of 1858, we know that Haswell is a native New Yorker, trained as an engineer who served as the “Engineer-in-Chief” for the U.S. Navy in 1842 until he resigned his military commission 1850 due in part to political pressure from the Fillmore administration. In contrast, Aldermen Tuomey and Reed were a “liquor dispenser” and a butcher, respectively. It seems that not only did Tuomey and Reed have a conflict of interest, but also their working class backgrounds would position them in opposition to

494 Leslie’s, July 10, 1858.
someone more seemingly “refined” as Haswell. Interestingly, Councilman James Cross, the fifth member of the committee, did not sign either the Majority or the Minority report. A New York *Daily Times* article from 1878 simply stated that he did not attend any meetings of the committee.495

The authors of the Majority Report — Aldermen Tuomey, Reed and Councilman Tucker — noted the “representations” in *Leslie’s* newspaper and referenced *Leslie’s* reporting on the “poisonous properties” of the milk. The Majority report went into great detail to acknowledge the public prejudice against swill milk, because Leslie’s illustrated news reports were “believed by the public generally” as well as sustained by other newspapers.496 Because of the heavy press coverage, the report claims that their opinion would prove to be “unsatisfactory” to both the public and to the Board of Health. Therefore, their report must rely on science to be valid: “to submit in detail a verbatim shorthand report of all the testimony elicited before them, together with several analyses of the milk and the swill made by the chemists, (all of which are hereto appended,) so that every person may judge for themselves, and the Board be enabled to take such action in the matter as it may deem most advisable."497

In short, the Majority Report’s decision regarding the swill milk issue was of little consequence to the industry. Owners were required to build better ventilation in

495 October 19, 1878.
496 New York Board of Health, *Majority and Minority Reports of the Select Committee of the Board of Health: Appointed to Investigate the Character and Condition of the Sources from Which Cow’s Milk Is Derived, for Sale in the City of New York. Together with the Testimony and the Chemical and Microscopical Analyses of Milks. Also, Letters from Distinguished Physicians, &C., &C., &C, 8-9.
497 Ibid.
their swill stables and provide cattle with two more feet of space above their current three-foot allotment. While the report admitted that some sores were found on cows, these sores were considered minor or from the inoculation process that dairymen used to prevent the swill milk disease. Otherwise, the cows were found to be in “general good condition.”

The Special Committee’s decision to require swill milk stable owners to make only modest modifications to the physical structures of the stables was met with surprise and disgust in the newspapers. In what amounted to minor recommendations was ignoring the vast amount of testimony lodged against the swill milk industry. Many in the press did not hold back judgment, accusing the Board of Health Special Committee of wholesale corruption. For example, the New York Tribune told their readers that the committee heard testimony from “a number of persons interested in or friendly to the nasty but profitable swill-milk business.” The Herald, had no problem articulating what was likely on everyone else’s mind: “Messrs. Tuomey, Tucker and D.H. Reed, members of the special committee of the New York Board of Health, to whom was referred the ‘swill milk’ investigation, have presented a majority report, in which cow stables are completely ‘whitewashed.’” Use of the term “whitewashing” was liberally applied by the newspapers to refer to both the act of cleaning up the swill stables before inspection and the adoption of only minor structural changes to swill milk stables. The Herald rebuked the Committee in the majority, accusing them of “only requir[ing], in the

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498 June 1, 1858, as reprinted in Duffy, A History of Public Health in New York City 1625-1866, 433.
opinion of the above gentlemen, a little more air and an extension of space to be excellent establishments. The cows are healthy, have no sores… no children have died from drinking swill milk, and the system of cow stabling is good generally.”

The news of “whitewashing” was picked up by newspapers outside of New York as well, just as news about Leslie’s pictorial exposé had. For example, the Alexandria Gazette, lifted, verbatim, the first sentence from the Herald article for publication. They also reprinted this from the Herald, word-for-word: “The cows, are reported, are healthy. Mr. Haswell dissents from all of this, and in a minority report, affirms his belief in most of the disgusting statements heretofore presented to the public.”

Perhaps taking the Herald’s lead, newspapers outside of the city explained to their readers that the decision by the Special Committee on swill milk was corrupt. For example, the Daily Evening Bulletin correspondent explained, with no surprise that, “The swill-milk investigation, instituted by our city council, has terminated as was anticipated, by the whitewashing of the business through a majority report.”

The resulting “Majority Report” by the Board of Health’s “Special Committee on Swill Milk,” obviously, was less than satisfactory to many. As John Duffy explains, the two reports — Majority and Minority — were submitted to the full Board of Health for a vote, and the Majority report was approved by a 16-11 vote. When the full Board of Health official adopted the Majority Report, the Daily Evening Bulletin reported, in a clearly disparaging remark, the correspondent said, “It has been officially declared that

499 Alexandria Gazette, July 1, 1858.
500 July 30, 1858.
the nauseous stuff is healthy and nutritious” and continued by judging that the swill milk business has endured such a shock that it would, “will hardly recover itself during this generation.”501

Noah A. Childs, a political candidate, set out to “remove the popular prejudices” in the public sphere about swill milk and the “stump-tail” cows. The eight-page pamphlet identified Childs as the “People’s Union Candidate for Member of Assembly,” and contained his testimony in front of the swill milk committee. Published by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, an organization with British roots whose aim was to popularize scientific knowledge, Childs shared his insights from, “twenty years as a swill milkman, and a proprietor of swill milk stables.”502 In the preface to his testimony, the text explained that Child’s experiences went against the “much-abused article known as swill milk, on the whole, scientifically and medically, better than that furnished by cows fed with grass…” The swill fed to city cows, “came into the stomach warm and pleasant, and produced the same happy and genial state as warm toddy to a distracted mind.” Reading between the lines, it seems the inebriated cows were likely docile and easier to control than country cows.

In his testimony, Childs contended that he owned both farm raised and grass fed cows as well as stable kept, swill milk cows. He received more grievances about the milk from his country cows. When asked, “The milk from the stables gives more satisfaction

than the country milk?” He replied, “ALWAYS; I never had any complaint, particularly, against my cows that I kept in the city, nor against the milk.” When asked about the condition of the cows he saw in the Thirty-ninth Street stables — one of the stables under investigation — he said, “the cows were not so good,” but speculated that “the best cows have been sold off.” When asked what is done with milk from sick cows, he explained that sick cows typically stop producing milk, but if you stop milking a sick cow, they “dry up,” so one must continue milking. “… but you have got to milk her every day,” Childs said, “and then, when she gets well, she will give milk again.” Childs avoided directly answering the question as to what is done with the little milk that presumably came from sick cows. Questioners included investigation committee members Reed, Tuomey and Tucker. The testimony also lists Mr. George Moore, a swill milk stable owner, and Mr. Leslie also as questioners.

It is difficult today to believe that a man who was not only running for political office but also was also financially invested in the swill milk industry, could provide detached and fair testimony on the swill milk matter. Noah Childs, like Dr. Shanks, claimed that the deleterious qualities of swill milk as reported were “humbug.” This narrative was constant but not widely embraced. The scientific community, as represented in their professional journals, strongly disagreed with the claim that swill was just as good, if not better, than grass fed and pasture raised cow’s milk. It is certainly indicative of the nature of the time: On one hand, the dominant belief among physicians and chemists labeled swill milk a dangerous, poisonous substance. Conversely, there was
a smaller group who saw gaps in the science. Whatever their motivations were, the fact remained that proving a direct, causal link between death and swill milk consumption was not possible.

*Seditious Cartoons: Leslie Arrested*

Despite the dissenting voices that supported the swill milk industry, a far stronger narrative permeated press coverage of the adoption of the Majority Report that did virtually nothing to modify the production and distribution of swill milk in the city. Frank Leslie’s newspaper was no exception, and he once again took to “pen and pencil” to object to what he thought was across-the-board corruption on the part of these city officials. Leslie would publish a series of cartoons in late July critical of the committee members who were accused in the media of being “in the pockets” of the swill milk business. Relying heavily on ethnic stereotypes as a narrative device, the first cartoon shows Alderman Reed, a butcher by trade, talking to “Mike O’Flan” who is trying to sell him a “swill milk” cow. In the cartoon, Reed’s nose is unusually large, and the cow looks as miserable as those depicted in the news illustrations, with bodily sores and a hanging tongue. The punch line reads, “I said that as an Alderman, not a butcher” in response to O’Flan’s offer to sell him the cow. A second cartoon depicts Alderman Tuomey looking disheveled and holding a bottle (presumably of alcohol) in one hand and a club in another (Figure 6-1). It was widely reported by the newspapers earlier in the month that Tuomey had threatened to drown a New York *Tribune* reporter. The cartoon in Leslie’s played upon that report to portray Tuomey as an out of control, Irish drunkard. The third cartoon
is of Councilman Tucker. Wearing a top hat and clothing that would code him as elite, Tucker is shown holding a spoon with a large bowl in front of labeled “swill milk.” Just like the captions under the cartoons that play on Irish stereotypes for laughs, the cartoon of Tucker, presumably of German origin, makes fun of German’s mispronouncing works with a v, writing the word “very” as “werry” (Figure 6-2).
Leslie pressed the whitewashing matter even further in his pictorial representations of the Alderman that he and others felt gave the swill milk business a free pass to continue poisoning the city. Leslie’s caricatures of the Alderman that he held responsible for setting back progress in the city would get him arrested not once, but twice, for libel. One cartoon featured on the back cover of the July 17 issue of Leslie’s showed Aldermen Reed, Tuomey and Tucker literally “whitewashing” a swill milk cow, worker and stable. If there was any doubt about their identity and what they were doing,
the caption clarified: “The Sixteenth Street Distillery Cows and Milkmaids, Undergoing
the Process of Whitewashing by Aldermen Tuomey, Tucker and Reed.” In the pocket of
the person depicted as Alderman Reed, a bag reads, “Rec’d $50.00 For Whitewashing.”
Alderman Tuomey’s caricature is shown painting a swill-milk stump-tailed cow and
receiving a bribe marked “$5000.” The Sixteenth Street stable superintendent — a figure
recognizable from previous sketches in Leslies — is the person placing the bribe in
Tuomey’s pocket (Figure 6-3). 503

503 Leslie’s, June 19, 1858.
Aldermen Reed and Tuomey filed separate libel suits against Leslie, and the press reported on Leslie’s arrest and indictment. The *Times* explained that testimony was collected from all sides and the matter “was adjourned to go to the Grand Jury,” according to a July 28 report. Lawyers representing Reed and Tuomey along with Leslie’s counsel argued before Justice Welsh at New York’s notorious Tombs, the city’s prison located in the equally notorious Five Points neighborhood, known as a slum with “narrow streets and decayed, foul-smelling buildings with a nationwide reputation for murder and vice.”

Leslie’s arrest also made the news outside of the city. The Omaha *Nebraskan*, for example, reported in August that, “Frank Leslie has been sued for libeling[sic] the stump-tailed cows. Alderman Reid[sic] of N. Y. sued him because he published a picture, a few weeks since, of the Swill Milk committee, of which Alderman Reid was one.”

The charges were eventually dismissed by the Grand Jury, as the courts were less tolerant of prosecuting the crime of libeling a public official by mid-century. Leslie reported on the dismissal of libel claims in the October 9 issue, saying that all but one of the city’s newspapers, owned by the President of the Board of Alderman, Clancey (editor of the *Leader*), fully supported Frank Leslie and understood the libel charges against him as erroneous. The press was “unanimous in condemning their course of action,” and

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505 *Omaha Nebraskan*, August 11, 1858.
507 *Leslie’s*, October 9, 1858.
“public opinion denounced them in unmeasured terms.” And the grand jury decision to throw out the libel claims, “confirms the previous decisions.” 508 “We presume that nothing more will be heard of the libelous cuts,” speculated the New York Times on November 1, 1858.

Leslie’s troubles with certain New York Aldermen would not be limited to accusations of libelous content. One of the more public skirmishes happened at the Metropolitan Hotel in early September at a Municipal Dinner to celebrate the laying of the Trans Atlantic cable. Members of the press were invited to the dinner, but Frank Leslie was excluded. In a letter reprinted in the New York Times, Leslie explained that he contacted Chairman McSpedon, an alderman who often voted with Tuomey, Reed and Tucker on the swill milk issue, and asked why he was excluded. Not accepting the answer that “no tickets were sent to the weekly press,” Leslie was offended that his newspaper, a “pictorial history of the passing events of our times,” was excluded from this important event; Leslie attended the event anyway and sat with a friend. In his letter, Leslie explains how several Aldermen were visibly upset at his presence at the dinner. When Leslie asked why he was the only newspaperman singled out for exclusion from the dinner event, he said Alderman McSpedon “replied that I knew the reason.” The police forcibly removed Leslie, and he surmised that his exclusion from the dinner was an attempt to suppress the media: “It is part of a deep-laid scheme to muzzle the Press, so that the villainies of official corruption may be withheld from public knowledge.” Leslie

508 Leslie’s, October 9, 1858.
does not mention swill milk by name, but anyone aware of recent events in the city would know that “the reason” Leslie was excluded. Leslie’s pictorial campaign and editorial cartoons not only implicated the business of swill milk as corrupt, but also implicated city Alderman as on the take from the swill milk business.\textsuperscript{509}

\textit{Conclusion}

The press continued reporting on the activities of the Board of Aldermen in relation to the swill milk issue through the end of 1858. Alderman Tucker proposed an amendment to the Majority Report that he coauthored, asking that the Committee on Ordinances requite that “every man who sold swill milk have the words ‘Swill fed Milk’ painted on his wagon,” reported by the New York \textit{Tribune}. But the Board was divided on the issue. Paraphrasing Alderman Stephens, the \textit{Tribune} reported that, “the report of the Committee had shown that swill-milk was not deleterious to health, and the analysis of the chemists justified the report.” The papers also insinuated that Tucker’s purpose in proposing the “swill fed milk” sign ordinance was to abate the negative reporting in the newspapers. Aldermen Reed and Tuomey, not surprisingly, also did not see a need for signage. One Alderman said that Tuomey’s “opposition [to the signage ordinance] was based upon a fear that the passage of the ordinance would neutralize the effect of the report.”\textsuperscript{510} In the \textit{Tribune’s} reporting on the Board of Alderman meetings, the subject of swill milk persisted around the issue of requiring signage for swill milk carts. Tiring of the issue, Tucker insisted in a July 30 meeting that they put the matter to a vote

\textsuperscript{509} Leslie’s, September 4, 1858.
\textsuperscript{510} The New York Daily Tribune, June 23, 1858.
immediately, “because he never wanted to hear of it again.” Tuomey said that he wanted the ordinance to cover all milk, not just swill, because there was “as much poison in country milk as in swill milk.” Reading between the lines, it seems that the Aldermen were in a battle of egos more than a genuine concern for the safety of the milk supply in New York City.511

The fact that the swill milk committee felt compelled to publish a “Majority and Minority Reports of the Select Committee of the Board of Health” to fend off criticism indicates that they knew their decision to propose minor change to urban dairy stables would be unpopular. Polling data is not available from this period, but one can surmise public opinion from the newspapers. The widespread accusations in the press of “whitewashing” likely reflect what many were thinking in the city, as well as across the country.

The main question the Swill Milk Committee set out to answer was whether or not swill milk was responsible for killing 8,000 children annually in the city of New York. Despite all of the testimony that was provided by the medical community that swill milk was “deleterious” to the public’s health, was swill milk really a poisonous substance, as it was so often claimed to be in the press? Were the stables producing large quantities of milk produced by sick and dying cows? The evidence would suggest the answer to be yes. Were these cows horribly mistreated during their tenure as producers of “swill milk?” Based on Leslie’ sketches and many eyewitness accounts, yes. And were

511 New York Daily Tribune, July 31, 1858.
these diseased cows sold for meat once they died? Probably, based on what can be deduced from the testimony. But was swill milk poison? The special committee would say, based on the evidence provided, one could not make a causal link of swill milk to being a deadly, poisonous product.

The controversy over whether swill milk killed continued. By 1863, one report from the medical community offered a different theory regarding the cause of disease among the dairy cattle: pneumonia. Reprinted in 1863 in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* article began by saying: “Our readers will remember the great outcry several years since in that usually quiet and amiable commercial metropolis of ours, New York, on the subject of ‘swill milk.’” After alluding to Frank Leslie’s reporting (“An illustrated paper was full of the most startling representations of the wretched creatures”), the article offered an update in views about the origin of dairy cows’ “wretched” state: “It now appears that the cows supposed to be sickened by their diet were really suffering from pleuro-pneumonia.” In retelling the swill milk crisis, the author explains that Leslie and the medical officials who visited and examined the cows “had entirely misrepresented the state of the case.” Distillery owner Fletcher, “a Massachusetts man and every inch a gentleman,” provided a tour of his cattle sheds to explain how both distillery grains and hay were fed to his livestock. The article concludes that it was not the cows’ diets that had caused contaminated milk; rather, a pneumonia-carrying cow used to supply milk on a voyage from England around 1850 was later sold to a dairy in Brooklyn, and, thus, the contamination presumably spread.
The article offers some words as “evidence”: Explaining that “milk consumed in the city of London is drawn from cows kept within the city limits and fed on distillers’ grains,” the article concluded, “and that milk is remarkable for its excellence.”

The science, if any, behind claims in this article is suspect at best. Anyone who followed the swill milk crisis would have known that the problem festered in the New York City area long before 1850. Nonetheless, the article is evidence of Leslie’s effect and shows the controversy over swill milk lasted beyond 1858.

512 The New England Journal of Medicine, July 30, 1863, 526-527.
Chapter Seven: Conclusion, Contributions and Future Research

A ceremony held at the Metropolitan Hotel in New York City on February 8, 1859, honored Frank Leslie with a gold watch designed to symbolize his investigation to expose the dangers of swill milk industry and rid the city of the business altogether. A storm that evening kept many of the “gentler sex” away, it was reported. Frank Leslie himself would also be absent, due to illness. Accepting on his behalf, a friend at the ceremony read a prepared statement by Leslie that expressed his gratitude for the honor. Leslie referred to the “personal risk” and the “heavy expense and loss” of his swill milk investigation, and expressed gratitude to be recognized for the “integrity and the purity of my motives” — by now familiar rhetoric from the editor and publisher. The ceremony included a speech by Dr. Francis, one of the physicians who had been advocating the removal of swill milk stables from the city for some time. The engraving on the watch read:

Presented to
FRANK LESLIE,
In behalf of
The Mothers and Children of New York,
As a grateful Testimonial of his manly and fearless Exposure
of the Swill Milk Traffic
December 25, 1858

The article explained that the movement to honor Leslie was “commenced privately among the wives, themselves mothers also, of our most eminent physicians” in the city. The engraving echoes a recurring sentiment that Leslie’s investigation
exemplified his heroic efforts on behalf of the public — especially on behalf of the 
women and children of New York.\textsuperscript{513}

\textit{Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper} was part of the burgeoning mass media 
landscape that, by the middle of the nineteenth century, was effectively shifting from 
early American partisan, elite roots toward serving a mass audience. The press was very 
much a part of the social fabric and of the industrial change happening in midcentury 
America. This seems exemplified by New York City, the epicenter of the printing 
industry and the country’s largest city coping with health problems associated with vast 
urban growth. Referring to the vibrant print culture in Antebellum America, Isabelle 
Leluu says that “The period often described as the golden age of print was in fact a period 
of unstable cultural order.” Leslie’s macabre portrayal of the swill milk business reflects 
that instability arising from massive changes in New York and other cities, changes 
brought about by the forces of urbanization.\textsuperscript{514}

The purpose of this research — to illuminate and contextualize how Frank Leslie 
used visual reporting to communicate the story about swill milk to the public — led to 
interpretation about social agendas framed by the illustrations, as well as the reality they 
shaped for readers. Ultimately, the illustrated content in \textit{Frank Leslie’s Illustrated 
Newspaper} about the 1858 swill milk crisis, the reaction to coverage, and subsequent city 
investigation, offers useful insights about Antebellum American journalism. As one of

\textsuperscript{513} “Presentation of a Gold Watch and Chain to Frank Leslie,” \textit{Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper}, 
the earliest attempts to use illustration to tell the news, the swill milk exposé served well for what Barbie Zelizer calls an “event study”: research treated as an “event” to examine the larger dimensions of Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper as a new form of storytelling and a new way of conveying news.515 Studying how Leslie’s communicated the dangers of drinking swill milk through illustration, this research offers several conclusions: Leslie’s pictorial reporting ushered in a new form of journalism; these illustrated reports had significant short-term and long-term impact; visual representations perpetuated the marginalization of certain groups; reporting on swill milk had implications for the developing concept of public health, and; as a regular self-promoter of his own work, Leslie was an early user of sensationalism in journalism.

**Illustrations as an Emergent form of Journalism**

Editor and publisher Frank Leslie, using his staff of reporter-artists to record “on the spot” drawings of activities about the swill milk business, presented a new way of reporting news by constructing a unique news narrative. In this case, that narrative revealed the negative and often unknown aspects of producing and distributing milk for human consumption in Antebellum America. The swill milk episode had elements of a compelling story, whether told in print or told visually: deaths, particularly among children, animal abuse, business corruption, and political indifference.

The graphic portrayal of death and dying associated with the mistreatment of dairy cattle presented an original news narrative. Research revealed that illustrations were

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constructed to convey unique meanings about the crisis. Cows were constructed visually as wretched, dying creatures, and Leslie’s illustrators gave these animals human-like qualities. By anthropomorphizing the dairy cows, the editor and his illustrators counted on viewers to not only object to mistreatment of the cows, but also to see the cows as a stand-in for the sick and dying children who drank swill milk. It is possible that Leslie felt that portraying suffering children would have crossed an ethical boundary in reporting; perhaps he believed he could get away with portraying suffering animals but not suffering humans. Publishing visual content that we would recognize today as “information graphics,” Leslie furthered the narrative about swill milk by using maps and other drawings meant to show change over time. Figure 4-15, for example, illustrates the degeneration over time of a cow’s hoof while that cow was fed distillery slop. Some illustrated content also reflected Leslie’s reliance on scientific evident to persuade readers about the dangers of swill milk. He used visual evidence gathered by his reporter-artists during the autopsy of a swill milk cow to show how these cows suffered on a swill-only diet. Images of internal organs as well as progression and comparative drawings illustrated the physical deterioration of swill milk cows. Referencing the expertise of the research conducted by the New York Academy of Medicine, Leslie also published reproductions of microscope images — evidence not observable without microscopic technology, to further his campaign against the swill milk industry.
Illustrations and their Influence

Leslie’s visual reporting also had significant short-term and long-term social impact. Following the first issue of Leslie’s that featured swill milk images, newspapers locally and nationally reported on the illustrated exposé. Tracing the public’s reaction to Leslie’s swill milk reports, it is clear that his pictorial representation of swill milk had an almost immediate, widespread impact across the North. New York daily newspapers were first to cover the effect of Leslie’s pictorial campaign against swill milk. New York correspondents representing newspapers from Boston to San Francisco reported about the excitement Leslie’s reports were generated in the city. As the news spread across the country, the accounts perpetuated the discourse that swill milk was a killer drink and also reproduced the discourse that Frank Leslie was instrumental in exposing the milk problem in New York and surrounding areas.

New York City’s reform-minded Mayor Tiemann appointed a committee consisting of elected officials to investigate the swill milk trade. Northern urban newspapers, in addition to reporting reaction to Leslie’s vivid pictorial representations, reported when New York City officials commenced investigating the swill milk trade. An indirect impact resulting from Leslie’s illustrated exposé — evidenced in news reports — other cities began to worry about the quality of milk in their cities. News accounts reported that city officials in Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati and Cleveland were playing more attention to milk producers, and some cities began to investigate the milk producers.
The “Majority and Minority Reports of the Select Committee of the Board of Health” — the published reports by the Board of Health’s “Special Committee on Swill Milk” — reported the testimony gathered in the investigation. There was not enough evidence, the Special Committee concluded, to directly link milk produced in urban dairy stables with death. Adopting the Majority Report, the city’s Board of Health only required stable owners to provide better ventilation and marginally more space per animal in the stables. These were hardly the reforms Leslie and others were seeking.

A dispute over what milk was better suited for human consumption — milk from grass-fed, country cows or from cows fed on leftover distillery slop from whiskey manufacturing emerged in the testimony. Individuals with direct ties to the swill milk business testified that swill milk was actually more nutritious and better tasting than grass-fed milk. However, the medical community — members of which had been warning about the ill effects of swill milk for years — testified overwhelmingly in favor of breaking up the large, urban stable businesses in the city.

Leslie and others in the press were very critical of Special Committee members because many believed that city leaders received kickbacks to leave the swill milk business alone. Aldermen Tuomey and Reed, for example, were thought to be “on the take” from wealthy and powerful distillery owners. Accordingly, the accusation of “whitewashing” became a common refrain in the press. Among numerous news reports accusing the special committee of whitewashing, Leslie put that accusation in editorial cartoon form. As a result, he was arrested twice for libel, but the charges were ultimately
dismissed, albeit criminal libel convictions continued during the era. One could conclude that, while words about whitewashing were tolerated press discourse, visual depictions of the same concept were more salient, and in the minds of some, crossed legal boundaries of proper press decorum.

Leslie’s crusade also seemed to change business practices among those that either sold or otherwise used milk in business dealings. The impact on commerce was almost immediate. In efforts to distance their businesses from swill milk, some owners, such as grocers and hotel proprietors, purchased advertising space in Leslie’s. Their ads were often in the form of a short letter to Frank Leslie, thanking him for his work on the swill milk problem and stating that their businesses now served only “pure Orange County milk”; thus, they effectively communicated to the public they had changed milk vendors.

Another early and clear impact was that Leslie’s exposé captured the public’s imagination. There were theatrical performances, published street literature and songs written about swill milk. Furthermore, the decline of cattle and milk market prices is further evidence that Leslie’s pictorial reporting had a significant impact on public understanding of the swill milk business.

Finally, an immediate impact that evolved into a long-term impact inheres in illustration as a “new” journalistic medium. Unlike the written word, pictures made news accessible to readers despite language barriers and illiteracy. The illustrations could communicate ideas and news frames that were not possible in printed words alone. While the written descriptions of cows in filthy stables could make nearly anyone’s stomach
turn, for example, it is the visual portrayal of the diseased cows that goes beyond what words could do. Because the detailed and provocative news images reproduced in Leslie’s could have captured a large audience that included people who did not read, those who would not have learned of the event through printed news were able to understand this public health crisis through the illustrations.

The pictorial news content in periodicals like Leslie’s would expand any readers’ understanding of her world, and it thus had the potential to raise political awareness among groups of citizens who were otherwise ignored or marginalized in the mainstream press and society-at-large. These citizens could readily understand visual representations of swill milk as a corrupt and dangerous business as depicted in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper.

**Race, Class and Gender**

Another conclusion from this research reveals social mores embedded in the visual representations of race, class, and indirectly, gender. Xenophobic visual depictions of the swill milk workers provide glimpses into a society that might be characterized today as marked by class and gender expectations. For example, the population directly affected by swill milk would have included Irish immigrants, and constructions of the swill milk dairy workers and cart drivers as Irish men dominated visual frames seen. In efforts to frame swill milk as an immoral business practice, Frank Leslie presented the Irish through common stereotypes that link them with pestilence. Semiotic analysis reveals that, when the Irish swill milk workers are racialized as subhuman in close
proximity to diseased and dying cows, the Irish men acquire those traits. Class is also drawn in symbolic ways to relegate the Irish as inferior to their fellow New Yorkers. Irish tropes, such as clay pipes and unstructured headwear and other wardrobe items that marked them as working-class is contrasted by others treated visually as more affluent. Furthermore, the Irish dairy workers are often portrayed in motion — i.e. performing hard labor — and hunched over while others, such as Leslie’s artists who appear in their own illustrations, are visually depicted well-dressed in top hats, long coats in a stoic stance.

Considering that the audience for Leslie’s newspaper would include the Irish immigrant population, the wholesale vilification of the Irish seems paradoxical on the surface. However, what might seem like an inconsistency on the surface can be explained through a closer analysis of gender in these representations. Irish men were often referred derogatorily as “milk maids” in Leslie’s as a challenge to their masculinity. Leslie’s direct address to mothers and children in his reports, as well as in his advertising, imply that he considered urban women as his first audience. Because women in Antebellum America were treated as pure and passive, they would have been seen as unwitting victims of swill milk at the hands of men. Men foisted the swill milk on passive women, in other words. Therefore, the absence of women from nearly all of Leslie’s illustrated content effectively sets the female Irish population apart from the male counterpart, thereby distinguishing the purity and innocence of [Irish] women from the “evil-doing” of Irish men.
Visual Reporting and Public Health

The visual reporting also had implications for the burgeoning conception of public health in nineteenth-century America. Studying New York City’s swill milk crisis as one event shows that illustrated reporting connected swill milk directly with disease and death. In addition to the more sensational content that was meant to evoke an emotional response, Leslie used scientific discourse to help support his claim that swill milk was killing New Yorkers. The scientific community supported Leslie’s efforts, as shown in professional journals and letters to the editor. Leslie’s pictorial exposé launched a national conversation about problems associated with urban dairy stables. The stables were framed as blight on the city and were often referred to in news stories as a “nuisance.” Frank Leslie’s newspaper perpetuated the theory that milk produced by cows fed on little except distillery slop was poisonous.

The news media crusade against the swill milk industry that continued in earnest for many years is likely due to Leslie’s extensive pictorial campaign. Measures to address the problem improved as efforts to improve sanitation in the city gained momentum in the 1860s. The Association for Improving the Conditions of the Poor and the Academy of Medicine, and other groups, became involved, and, along with the New York Sanitary Association, bypassed municipal-level channels to take reform efforts to the state legislature. The first significant blow against swill milk came in 1862 with passage of a bill that established a $50 fine for selling adulterated milk or keeping filthy stables, and a $100 fine for failure of milk wagons to display signage showing the source of their
milk. Despite the new laws, the mistreatment of cattle and the adulteration or watering down of milk continued in the city and was reported in the press for years to come.

Self-promotion and Sensationalism

Coverage shows that Frank Leslie used sensational methods when reporting on swill milk. Recognizable in what would be labeled “yellow journalism” by the end of the nineteenth century, Leslie’s attack on the swill milk business included crusading against corruption, appeals to emotions, huge illustrations and graphics that included dramatic front page features, to communicate the dangers of swill milk to the public’s health. Elements of promotion and self-promotion tactics that are sometimes used today in public relations are evident in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, especially in self-advertising. For example, placing an advertisement in the form of a letter to the public in advance of his first swill milk issue in New York daily newspapers, he employed a perhaps unprecedented public relations maneuver. He also frequently reminded his readers in his own newspaper about the hardship he and his reporter-artists suffered in order to bring to light the shameful and dangerous practice of swill milk. He did not fail to stress that all the effort was expended in the public interest, that is, for the public’s protection and to bring about more humane treatment of livestock. Thus, he might be called a pioneer in public relations—an area of work that began to emerge as a profession a half-century or more after his investigation of swill milk.

516 Duffy, A History of Public Health in New York City 1625-1866, 436.
517 Egan, "Organizing Protest in the Changing City: Swill Milk and Social Activism in New York City, 1842–1864."
Leslie received many public accolades and much monetary profit from telling the swill milk story, but it would be wrong to interpret his motives as purely to achieve fame and fortune. It is reasonable to assume that Leslie and his team of reporters were inspired to work on behalf of the most vulnerable populations in the city and to make business corruption and municipal neglect known to the public. Because of this, he might also be fairly called a precursor of the Muckrakers who investigated corruption and instigated changes decades later. Leslie certainly profited from his swill milk reports, but he also exposed the unconscionable living conditions of dairy cows and the perceived fatal qualities of the milk these animals produced. It should be noted that, while it is well-known that he profited through street sales and subscriptions to his pictorial newspaper, Leslie also supplemented his income with sales from other periodicals he published, such as women’s magazines and miscellanies, sometimes producing as many as ten publications at once.\textsuperscript{518}

The reports on swill milk in \textit{Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper} did not put a halt to the unhealthy dairy practices in New York City. Twenty years later, swill milk was still very much a problem. One can see elements of the narrative Leslie crafted about swill milk in an 1878 cartoon by Thomas Nast. The editorial cartoon, appearing in Leslie’s competitor, \textit{Harper’s Weekly}, portrayed a skeleton serving up swill milk to a

\textsuperscript{518} Mott, \textit{American Journalism, a History: 1690-1960}, 378.
mother accompanied by her emaciated children dressed in ragged clothes. Other than the skeleton, every other element of the cartoon could pass as more realistic, from the mother’s dress to the children’s forlorn faces.

**Contributions to Journalism and Mass Communication**

This research contributes to knowledge about the historical development of visual journalism. In the few historical accounts that mention swill milk, Leslie and his newspaper are minimally credited with exposing city and business corruption without any serious interrogation of the news illustrations and how they constructed meaning for the public, or the effects of pictorial reporting on public health policy.

The dearth of scholarship on the illustrated press and its development, especially before the U.S. Civil War, indicates the need for inquiries like this one into the early practices of visual storytelling in the mass media. Considering the press as part of the larger culture that helps create, negotiate and maintain a sense of community, how did Leslie’s reportage on the swill milk business function to normalize — or challenge — conceptions of public health and the government’s responsibility to help those in need? Evidence shows that the swill milk exposé as news in pictures captured the public’s attention, not only in New York, but also across the country. But he also used sensationalistic tactics, such as xenophobia and anthropomorphism, to construct a limited, and sometimes misleading, narrative about the swill milk crisis.

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Research here rested, in part, on visual theory that images can facilitate a person’s sense of connection to others better and more quickly than the printed word can. That is, this research contributes to theory that visual news connects a person to other individuals and to her community differently than does the printed word. In Antebellum America, some among the immigrant population who did not read English, and those who were not literate due to socio-economic circumstances, could access the meaning of visual images, such as those of the swill milk episode, in an instant.

How the emerging visual journalism in the mid-nineteenth century helped shape the narrative about swill milk as a public health issue underscores the essential role a free press plays in democracy. Leslie and his newspaper’s part in shaping visual journalism are illuminated through exploring a public health issue that aroused competing ideologies. The swill milk issue in Antebellum America reflects competing beliefs regarding the role of government and boundaries of free enterprise; and the visual representations that Leslie crafted in the 1850s continue to be recognizable in discourses today.

Frank Leslie’s obituary — perhaps written by Leslie himself before his death — provides insight into the perceived importance of his swill milk investigation in journalism history:

Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, now in its twenty-fifth year, came to an eager and appreciative public... Its pages have illustrated the history of this great country...every event of public importance, having been duly, and faithfully, and vividly chronicled. Its earlier subscribers will recall the graphic pictures of the Burdell murder... the exposure of
the swill-milk horrors, for his actions in regard to which Mr. Leslie received public recognition and a public testimonial; ... and of other engrossing subjects too numerous to mention.

*Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, January 24, 1880.

The accomplishments listed in his obituary cite Leslie’s pictorial reporting of many events still recognized as world-changing, such as the laying of the Atlantic Cable, the execution of John Brown, and the U.S. Civil War. But the obituary excerpt suggests that it was Leslie’s coverage of the “swill-milk horrors” that positioned him as a civic figure. Leslie and his illustrated newspapers, the obituary writer suggests, should be remembered as playing an important role in the development of American pictorial journalism.

The place of Frank Leslie and *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* in journalism history remains unsettled. Leslie and his reportage served, undoubtedly, as agents for social change, although serious reforms to swill milk dairy farming did not occur until the end of the century. Leslie was a major participant in the New York publishing scene from the 1850s through the U.S. Civil War and beyond. Still, his influence on visual journalism is slighted in histories of journalism in the nineteenth century. This dissertation contributes important information and insight about this understudied area of journalism history.

**Future Research**

The strong belief that milk and dairy are required to maintain one’s health is an enduring myth in American culture. Further research could reveal connections between
Leslie’s efforts to expose the swill milk business and the evolution of milk as a cultural commodity in relation to the “perfection” of modern America. The myth of milk as essential to the human diet was established when food science was still new, and at a time when Americans were enjoying a wider variety of food in daily diets, thanks in part to the rise of consumer culture. Erna Melanie DuPuis concludes in her analysis of early 20th century discourses about milk for human consumption that, “the relationship between consumer consciousness and the rise of industrial food is more complex than current narratives about the industrialization of food currently acknowledge.” Furthermore, the concept of “perfection” coincides with “a society in the midst of rapid social change and one that was becoming increasingly consumer-oriented.” It can be argued that Leslie’s exposé of the swill milk stables was part of the larger program in modern America, alongside the massive social changes underway in 1858 New York City.

Another area for future research concerns the deeper meanings concerning the portrayals of dairy cattle. The visual exposé about swill milk portrayed abuse and neglect. Leslie’s news images reveal a keen empathy for animals. While the notion of animal rights would not take shape until later in the century, Leslie’s sympathetic portrayal of the cows’ horrible living conditions and their poor treatment could be considered a forerunner to animal rights activism. Leslie’s visual technique to solicit outrage and public attention endure today. Contemporary animal rights advocacy groups often use video cameras to document animal abuses and then distribute the evidence to a

521 Ibid.
worldwide audience via the Internet. For example, undercover video showing the abuse of chickens at Sparboe Farms, the fifth largest U.S. egg producer, prompted public outrage that led McDonald’s to cease business with the egg supplier. Target Corporation pulled all Sparboe Farms eggs from sale in Target Stores, and other grocers are following suit. While the form and distribution of the media are different today, the goals of animal rights groups to stop abuse to animals are not unlike Frank Leslie’s efforts to end swill milk over 150 years earlier.

More research is needed about Frank Leslie’s place in investigative journalism history. It is important to note here that some credit Frank Leslie with originating investigative reporting, as that term is understood today. Much evidence can be assembled to support that view. However, some say James Gordon Bennett began investigative reporting and point to his interview-based stories about the 1840s Jewett murder case. And possibly, several journalists predated both Bennett and Leslie in investigative reporting. Study of this area is needed with special attention, perhaps, to documenting how Leslie’s investigative reporting departed or is distinct from any previous reporting that might be claimed as investigative. Furthermore, more research is needed regarding Leslie’s relationship with the American showman, P.T. Barnum. As Leslie’s first employer in the United States, more study is needed to better illuminate how the infamous promoter influenced Leslie’s career as a New York publisher.

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Considering the ubiquity of visual images today and their capacity to uniquely inform and teach meaning about a public issue, research about visual journalism’s past is imperative for understanding how historical foundations shaped visual media today. Future research, positioning *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper* as a pioneer in investigative journalism, could also examine the legal and ethical dimensions of these early efforts to visualize the news. Newspaper crusades date from the colonial period in U.S. history, and a study of Leslie’s early pictorial reporting would broaden the current scholarship to better explicate the legal and ethical aspects of visual reporting that began in earnest a few years before the U.S. Civil War.
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