

The History of Acta Diurna

The Acta Diurna (also known as Commentarii Senatus, Acta populi, Acta publica, or just Acta or Diurna) is the earliest recorded newspaper in history. It was created in ancient Rome during the reign of Julius Caesar, before the age of the Roman Empire. The words “Acta Diurna” are Latin for the words “daily acts”, which can also be translated to “daily public records” as well as “daily gazette”. Despite its age, there is a lot we know about the Acta Diurna, although unfortunately some information has been lost to time.

The Acta Diurna was first founded during 59 BC by Julius Caesar and continued publishing all the way until 222 AD. It is credited as being the first step towards written communication from oral communication, since before the Acta Diurna, news was spread only through word of mouth. Caesar had ordered the documentation and publishing of the many different acts of the Roman people in the day by public officers. Everyday the Acta Diurna was drawn up by these public officers and presented to the people of Rome on a board which was called an “Album.” The Acta Diurna was similar to an early newspaper for Romans during this time period. These “newspapers” were carved into stone or metal and presented onto message boards in public areas such as the Forum of Rome. Later on, they were written on paper and distributed by hand. The news that was covered in the messages consisted of court news, births, deaths, marriages, political news, military news, trials, executions and decrees from the Roman Emperors at the time along with ones from the Roman senate and magistrates. The Annals were a similar form of “newspaper” to the Acta Diurna which stopped production in 130 BC. Despite their similarities, the Acta Diurna only covered more important topics and were better preserved than the Annals. Some copies were made of some issues of the Acta Diurna by scribes who then sent them to different governors in order for them to have their information. Some Roman

Emperors after Caesar used the Acta Diurna to announce royal and/or senatorial events and decrees from the Roman courts. The Acta Diurna is credited as the first use of “publicare et propagare” which means "make public and propagate" in Latin. This phrase was written at the end of the Acta Diurna for both non-citizens and citizens of Rome.

Following the death of Julius Caesar, Rome's new emperor, Augustus (later known as Octavian) Caesar ordered that the Acta Diurna would no longer be available to the public and instead only available to senators. After his death, during the time of his successor in the first century, Tiberius Caesar, ordered a senator to write up the Acta Senatus to keep records which were then kept inside of the imperial archives as well as inside public libraries. These documents could only be accessed by people who had special permission from the emperor or the senate. Under the Roman Empire, after 27 BCE, the Acta Diurna had formed a type of daily gazette, in a way becoming a prototype for newspapers in later centuries as well as in the ones we see in the modern day.



Figure 1: Picture of an example of an issue of the Acta Diurna, the first entry, along with most of its entries, were never found.

Due to the nature of the Acta Diurna, it wasn't able to be widely circulated as the newspapers we see today. Although during the early 1400s in 1440, the first printing press was invented by Johannes Gutenberg. The movable type printing press allowed for the production of around four thousand high-quality printed copies of books and other papers, four times what could be done by hand by a scribe. This invention allowed newspapers to be a lot more

accessible to the public as it brought down the price due to the increase in the number of copies. Despite being invented much earlier, the first recorded weekly newspaper to utilize Gutenberg's printing press was *Relations: Aller Furnemmen* which was printed by Johann Carolus and the *Aviso Relations over Zeitung* which was printed by Lucas Schulte. These newspapers did not name the cities in which they were published in order to avoid persecution from the government, although today we can approximate their general location due to the paper's use of the German language. Even with the risk of persecution, the newspapers had great success, being able to spread quickly all over Central Europe. Over the course of five years, these newspapers were available in Basel, Frankfurt, Vienna, Hamburg, Berlin, as well as Amsterdam. During 1621, the first English newspaper was printed with the title *Corante*, also known as *Weekly newes from Italy, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Bohemia, France and the Low Countries*. By the year 1641, a newspaper was printed in nearly every country in Europe as the use of publication spread all the way from France, to Italy and to Spain.

Although newspapers were now very common in Europe during the 1600s, they did not begin appearing in the American Colonies until 1690. The first newspaper printed in America was called *Public Occurrences, Both FORREIGN and DOMESTICK* by Benjamin Harris. Harris had been an editor for a newspaper in England prior to fleeing to America after publishing an article about a supposed Catholic plot against England. It wasn't until another fourteen years had passed when more American newspapers were created. The newspapers that followed the *Public Occurrences* were *The Boston Newsletter* and fifteen years after its creation *The Boston Gazette* was made, quickly followed by the *American Weekly Mercury* published in Philadelphia.

Even in the newspapers that we see today, the influence of the *Acta Diurna* can still be seen. The *Acta Diurna* is credited with establishing the principles in modern journalism such as

reporting in a timely manner as to stay up to date, the necessity of providing accurate information to the people and public accountability.

Despite being as ancient as it is, the Acta Diurna was undeniably a huge inspiration for the format of the newspapers we see today, as well as the ones in the past. Being the first of its kind and going through all the changes it did as well as lasting as long as it did makes the Acta Diurna truly unique and memorable. Although it became discontinued in 222 AD, it is still important to learn about as it can both tell us about life during the ancient Roman Empire, as well as show the starting point and prototype of the newspapers we all see today.

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Images Used

Figure 1: <https://magnadea.com/blogs/acta-diurna/the-meaning-behind-acta-diurna>

