American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses, produced through the collaboration of Angelina Grimké Weld, her husband, Theodore Weld, and her sister, Sarah Grimké, had a tremendous impact on the abolition movement when it was published by the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1839.¹ The book offered abolitionists new ammunition for their spoken and written war against slavery. It is not well known, however, that American Slavery As It Is was the product of a new way of using media, one that is now familiar to us through our computer-based keyword and Lexis/Nexis searches. The book combined personal testimony from those who lived, or who had lived, in the South, elicited via a form letter--a questionnaire of sorts--with evidence gleaned from a vast archive of newspapers. Here I will focus on that innovative use of newspapers, for in writing American Slavery As It Is, the Grimkés and Weld reconceptualized the press and mined it as a database.

Sarah and Angelina Grimké were born into a slaveholding family in South Carolina but rejected that life to become ardent abolitionists, traveling New England as strong, effective speakers, testifying to their direct experience of seeing the effects of slavery on both slaves and owners. When Angelina Grimké married the abolitionist and reformer Theodore Dwight Weld in 1838 and settled in Fort Lee, New Jersey, with her husband and sister, the two sisters retired from public speaking. Abolitionist friends were dismayed at losing such convincing orators. (Weld, himself an inspiring orator, had ended his speaking career in 1836 due to health problems.) The work the three next embarked upon, American Slavery As It Is, was, according to Thomas C. Leonard, the most widely read anti-slavery publication until Uncle Tom’s Cabin--and Harriet Beecher Stowe reportedly slept with it “under her pillow while writing” her pathbreaking novel (121).

American Slavery As It Is included testimony from those who had lived in the South and from former slaveholders like Sarah and Angelina Grimké themselves.² It relied heavily on materials from the southern press, particularly advertisements for runaway slaves. Republishing these ads was not in itself an innovation, however. Abolitionists had already discovered that they could reconceptualize the information from such ads so that they functioned no longer as


² Ibid., p. 13.
respectable, conventional notices of slaveholders seeking lost property, addressing other likeminded readers, or, if brought to a nonslaveholding readership, as exotic or troubling announcements, news from some other world. For example, William Lloyd Garrison’s Boston-based paper the *Liberator*, beginning with its sixth issue in 1831, reprinted ads for runaway slaves and slave auctions in a section called “Slavery Record.” This reprinting turned the slaveholder’s voice against himself. As Dan McKanan observes, when these ads were recontextualized, “[t]he slave owner became a witness against himself, testifying that violence was intrinsic to the property relation of slavery.” Soon, other journals took up the practice of using such “self-subverting quotation[s]” (135). Using such ads was attractive because it removed abolitionist discourse from the abstract realm of rhetorical defense or opposition and crucially used the slaveholders’ own words, spelled out in the brass tacks language of commercial speech. The Grimké-Weld collaborative, however, shifted from treating these ads as anecdotes to reinterpreting them as data about the brutality of slavery. The marks, scars, and shackles that slaveholders noted as a means of identification became indictments of the treatment of slaves.

*American Slavery As It Is* represented data mined from an enormous number of papers. Forty-five years later, Weld recalled,

> After the work was finished, we were curious to know how many newspapers had been examined. So we went up to our attic and took an inventory of bundles, as they were packed heap upon heap. When our count had reached twenty thousand newspapers, we said: “There, let that suffice.” Though the book had in it many thousand facts thus authenticated by the slave-holders themselves, yet it contained but a tiny fraction of the nameless atrocities gathered from the papers examined. (qtd. in Birney 258-59)

Weld noted that the sisters had “spent six months, averaging more than six hours a day”—the good daylight hours—“searching through thousands upon thousands of Southern newspapers, marking and cutting out facts of slave-holding disclosures for the book” (qtd. in Birney 258).

With these large piles of papers, it became possible for the Grimkés and Weld to sort, categorize, and annotate what they found in the ads. The Grimkés used their expert knowledge as the daughters of a slaveholding family who had lived in the South to identify some of the figures involved and to interpret the practices hinted at in the ads in newspapers that were,
crucially, published by slaveholders. These ads were a weapon. In the words of Sarah Grimké, written to her friend Jane Smith on 24 January 1839 as she worked on the book:

Our present occupation . . . looking over southern papers, is calculated to help us . . . see the inside of that horrible system of oppression which is enfibred with the heart strings of the South. In the advertisements for runaways we detect the cruel whippings & shootings & brandings, practiced on the helpless slaves. Heartsickening as the details are, I am thankful that God in his providence has put into our hands these weapons prepared by the South herself, to destroy the fell monster. (qtd. in Thomas 168-69)

They mined the advertisements for information that they then sorted into categories such as “tortures, by iron collars, chains, fetters, handcuffs, &c.,” “brandings, maimings, gun-shot wounds, &c.,” and “Mutilation of Teeth” (American 72, 77, 83). They interpreted their data, supplementing it with testimony, their own knowledge, and added commentary. Thus, for example, what might be the simple loss of a tooth in an era of bad dentistry, mentioned among other physical attributes in an ad for a runaway, is exposed to be part of a scheme to identify slaves:

Another method of marking slaves, is by drawing out or breaking off one or two front teeth--commonly the upper ones, as the mark would in that case be the more obvious. An instance of this kind the reader will recall in the testimony of Sarah M. Grimké . . . of which she had personal knowledge; being well acquainted both with the inhuman master . . . by whose order the brutal deed was done, and with the poor young girl whose mouth was thus barbarously mutilated, to furnish a convenient mark by which to describe her in case of her elopement, as she had frequently run away. (83)

These advocates thus transformed an undifferentiated pile of ads for runaway slaves, wherein dates and places were of primary importance, into data about the routine and accepted torture of enslaved people, rendered in the neutral language of commerce.

Interpreted correctly, the ads yielded information on a horrifying spectrum of abuse, including the separation of families--evident in such items as “Runaway--my negro man, Frederick, about 20 years of age. He is no doubt near the plantation of G. W. Corprew, Esq of Noxubbee county, Mississippi, as his wife belongs to that gentleman, and he followed her from
my residence” (164). Other advertisements illuminated the use of slaves in medical experiments. Beyond the ads, the Grimkés read other parts of the southern press to take the pulse of the South. They clipped news stories that reported the jailing of enslaved children or extremely elderly people and stories that celebrated the capture and punishment of runaways. These accounts yielded evidence of “public opinion” in the South, a phrase *American Slavery* uses repeatedly (see, for example, 143).

Marking and reprocessing the newspapers allowed Angelina Grimké Weld and Sarah Grimké to compile the book’s “many thousand facts thus authenticated by the slave-holders themselves” (Birney 259). Having sorted and categorized the data in the ads, they made the book more usable to readers via a table of contents and an index, which allowed for discontinuous, topical access. One can use it to look up subjects such as “Lives of slaves unprotected, 155” and “chopping of slaves piecemeal, 93” (214, 212). The index entries also editorialize: “plantations second only to hell, 114” (217). The individual and specific horrors were thus catalogued, sorted, and made accessible to be used as evidence in speechmaking or novel writing.

This mode of reading the proslavery press so convinced readers of its reliability that they even felt confident substituting the Grimké-Welds’ readings for their own. Readers reported that they could use it to “stump” slaveholders--one said he related incidents of cruelty from the book, and when the slaveholders said they were lies, “he would pull Weld’s volume from his pocket and give names, places, and dates from Southern papers” (Thomas 172). As Meredith L. McGill demonstrates, Charles Dickens took it up in his *American Notes* in 1842. He quoted from it without attribution, recording specific ads that he lifted from *American Slavery As It Is* in his reports on his southern travels as though he had come across the ads himself. In other words, he drew on a work compiled in New York and New Jersey from papers mailed from the South, to flesh out and provide detail for his own travels in the South (127-28). Circulation and recirculation became a mode through which readers and travelers themselves came to understand the South and slavery. New York, as a burgeoning media center, figured as a funnel, a hub for collecting representations, amplifying them, and sending them back out. The material re-circulated back to the Southern newspapers, as well, and became a taunt, as Leonard reports: “The southern newspapers used in the volume were each sent a copy gratis, with its unwitting contributions marked” (121). Moreover, *American Slavery As It Is* taught abolitionists and
others a mode of reading the press. After drawing on *Slavery As It Is* in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe then used it in composing *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, quoting, for example, the “testimony” given by “an unimpeachable witness, Miss Sarah M. Grimké” of the iron collar being used on “[a] handsome mulatto woman” (89; see also 21 and 90). Stowe’s *Key*, according to Leonard, “recycled Weld-Grimké clippings and added her own from more than 200 southern papers to support her novel” (121). Stowe notes in *Key* that “[t]he papers from which these facts were copied were preserved and put on file in a public place [the office of the American Anti-Slavery Society], where they remained for some years, for the information of the curious” (21).

Slaveholders objected that the information represented in these sources reflected atypical situations, but the sheer number of newspapers comprising the Grimké-Weld database provided a strong refutation to that argument. In fact, the slaveholders had a point: In any single paper that *American Slavery As It Is* quotes, there might be only one such ad, and, in fact, the Grimkés must have looked at some papers that yielded nothing. Moreover, someone taking up the invitation to visit the office of the American Anti-Slavery Society to read the newspapers they had used might find the ads in very different form. The Grimkés sharply edited the ads to eliminate most of the identifying information about the ex-slaves, ensuring that the notices they had converted to raw material for their anti-slavery arguments did not inadvertently revert to their original function and provide information that would lead to recapture. They also trimmed to highlight the points they wished to focus on—the separation of families and not the escapee’s “rather sulky appearance,” for example. Trimming also concentrated the information, making it easier to compile. When a single ad was placed alongside dozens of other similar advertisements, the information became a data point in a wide-ranging representation of a common practice. It was the work of trimming, sifting, and aggregating the material that re-created it as a database and not just a collection of anecdotes.

The Grimké-Weld household’s project of mining the newspapers was made possible by access to large piles of southern newspapers. Where did they come from? One possible source may have been the reading rooms and public libraries of New York City, locations crucial to spreading ideas and information. Some reading rooms were political, offering print resources in support of a cause. For example, in the late 1830s there were at least two antislavery reading rooms in New York City, both run by antislavery newspapers, making use of the newspapers and
magazines they received in their exchanges. Like other newspapers, abolition papers exchanged free copies with other publications and were allowed by the Post Office to mail exchange copies without cost. The antislavery papers received copies of pamphlets, as well, which they made available to visitors who paid a yearly or weekly fee. Both these reading rooms framed their projects as offering resources to the black community.

One such reading room was run by David Ruggles, an African American activist with the New York Committee of Vigilance and editor of the Mirror of Liberty, whose office was located at Lispenard and Church Streets. In May 1838 he announced that he had opened a reading room at the Committee’s office, offering “access to the principal daily and leading anti-slavery papers, and other popular periodicals of the day.” Complaining that other lyceums and reading rooms were segregated, he proclaimed, “[W]ithout some centre of literary attraction for all young men whose mental appetites thirst for food, many are in danger of being led into idle and licentious habits by the allurements of vice which surround them on every side” (“Circular” par. 2). His reading room would prevent that.

Perhaps there was some competition, or perhaps a district of antislavery reading rooms had begun to emerge, for less than half a mile away, on Duane Street, another antislavery reading room had opened, sponsored by the weekly Colored American, a black-owned newspaper. In February 1838, the editors had opined that “there is nothing so much needed by all classes of our people, as a well-furnished and well-selected reading establishment. Such an institution would be productive of the greatest good” (“A Reading” par. 1). In January 1839, the paper announced that it planned to offer to “friends and subscribers” a place to read the other papers they received in their exchanges. While those papers would have included the abolitionist press, the Colored American exchanged with others as well. It announced, “Our Files are well filled with the principal Foreign and Domestic papers--Religious, Moral, Literary and Political” (“READING” par. 2).

While these antislavery reading rooms—and others around the country, like the one Frederick Douglass ran in Rochester--were valuable as sites for following the movement, spreading knowledge of events and tactics, and possibly for education and self-improvement as their prospectuses proclaimed, they were not extensive repositories. The surely did not draw their wealth of evidence from them. Other newspapers, too, offered some form of access to their exchange papers to readers, but even those would not have been sufficient for the purposes of
Grimkés and Weld, especially since most newspapers were partisan and more likely to exchange with like-minded publications, and therefore have only such newspapers on hand. A different kind of home-based exchange became relevant here for the thorough and extensive coverage that gave *American Slavery As It Is* its powerful evidentiary status.

According to Trish Loughran, Theodore Weld commuted daily from his home in Fort Lee, New Jersey, to his office on Nassau Street in Manhattan, where he purchased “in bulk” newspapers that were to be “sold for waste when their newsworthiness expired,” and bringing them home to Fort Lee, where “the Grimkés performed ‘their daily researches’ at the kitchen table” (355, 356, 357). Forty years after the fact, Theodore Weld reported that he had purchased the more than twenty thousand papers comprising his database--all the “papers published in the Southern States and Territories,” somewhere between six months’ and two years’ worth--from a reading room that he recalled as the New York Commercial Reading Room (Birney 258-59). This was almost certainly Gilpin’s Merchants’ Exchange Reading Room, a large room located inside the New York Stock Exchange. It received hundreds of newspapers from around the country and the world and was tied into other forms of communication and commerce through keeping mailbags for departing ships. It was a central point in the stock exchange for merchants to learn of relevant activity going on in remote regions. The city’s commercial ties, of course, extended to the slave states and their productions. Accessibility of a public sphere of print meant that newspapers were available to be used in many ways. Just as the words of the slaveholders could be turned against themselves, institutions like the Exchange reading room that commerce depended on could be turned from their tasks of commerce and used against themselves.

Ruggles had complained of the whites-only policy of reading rooms like this one. As well, like most public spaces associated with commerce, the room probably did not admit women--an 1863 engraving of the interior shows an all-white, all-male clientele. The collaboration between Theodore Weld and the Grimké sisters, then, allowed the sisters access to an immense lode of data from which they would otherwise have been barred; their labor and expertise made the processing and reading of this data possible.

Thus the extraordinary repurposing, reuse, and, most important, reconceptualizing of media represented by *American Slavery As It Is* entailed a complex negotiation between modes of access to media, expertise, and the imagination and vision to understand that southern newspapers could not only be made to speak against themselves, but that they could be picked
through, tagged, and sorted to create a new mode of understanding information. In his essay, “Farewell to the Information Age,” linguistics scholar Geoffrey Nunberg has commented on the shift in the nineteenth century from understanding *information* as the process of being informed to a conception of it as a substance that could be morselized as isolated bits of data. That new understanding came together with the growing sense of urgency abolitionists felt—the sense that simply softening the hearts of slaveholders was ineffectual and that hard facts were needed—that enabled the Grimké-Weld collaborative to turn to a new way of working. As Angelina Grimké Weld wrote to her sister Anna R. Frost, “[F]acts, FACTS, have set in motion all that machinery in England” that freed the slaves in the British West Indies and turned England against slave-grown cotton” (Barnes and Dumond 2: 789). Like present-day academic researchers who pick through databases for particular uses of words, for authors’ names, or for fragments of poetry to place them into new contexts that will yield new interpretative possibilities, Sarah and Angelina Grimké and Theodore Weld reconceived of ads and articles in proslavery papers as items that could be broken free of their surroundings and aggregated, strung along a different thread to yield a damning portrait of slavery written in the slaveholders’ own words.

Notes
1. Although writers like Spender have criticized Theodore Weld for failing to share authorial credit for *American Slavery As It Is* with his wife and sister-in-law, his name does not actually appear on the 1839 edition as the book’s author. Authorial credit seems to have been assigned to Weld later. See Spender 166.
2. See Loughran for details of how the testimonies of first-hand witnesses to slavery’s abuses were gathered in response to a widely distributed “personalized circular letter” (355). Stowe also reported these procedures in *Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin* 21.
3. See Rohrbach for an examination of the relationship of the *Liberator* to “liberal capitalism and moral suasion” (2).
4. *American Slavery As It Is* includes a four-line item “from the ‘Richmond (Va.) Whig,’ June 30, 1837. ‘Ranaway, my man Peter.--He has a sister and mother in New Kent, and a wife about fifteen or eighteen miles above Richmond, at or about Taylorsville. Theo. A. Lacy’” (166). This emphasis, of course, did not appear in the much longer ad as it was actually printed, which also noted the man’s skin color and build, sulky appearance, and what he was wearing (“Notice”).
5. Other than Weld’s mention of it, I have found no references to the New York Commercial Reading Room. The size of Gilpin’s Exchange, its proximity to the office of the American Anti-Slavery Society offices, and the fact that the Emancipator had used its resources at around the same time, suggests that forty years after the fact, Weld simply got the name of the room wrong, possibly mixing it up with the name of one or more similar rooms in other cities. Gilpin’s Exchange was situated a couple of blocks from the office of the New York Journal of Commerce, founded by Arthur Tappan, who worked with Weld at the office of the American Antislavery Society, itself located only half a mile away on Spruce Street. The American Anti-Slavery Society, which published American Slavery As It Is also published the Emancipator, and that periodical had used the Reading Room to summarize various items of interest in southern newspapers at least once shortly before the Grimké-Weld project began (“Reading Room Gleanings”). In 1834, Gilpin’s cost seven dollars a year to use, or, for “strangers,” seventy-five cents per month (Williams 159).

6. An engraving showing the interior of the “Reading Room of the Merchants Exchange and Newsroom” appeared in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, 30 May 1863, 147. It is on the website Mr. Lincoln and New York (Lincoln Institute). See http://www.mrlincolnandnewyork.org/photo_credits.asp?photoID=2&subjectID=3&ID=31

Works Cited


“Notice.” *Richmond Whig* 30 June 1837: 3.


“Reading Room Gleanings.” *Emancipator* 42.163 (15 Feb. 1838): col. A.


