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978-0-521-07074-4 - Robert Harley and the Press: Propaganda and Public Opinion in the age of Swift and Defoe

J. A. Downie

Excerpt

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## Introduction

In 1695, with the expiry of the licensing act, state censorship of the press ceased. The end of the licensing system coincided almost exactly with the passing of the triennial act (in December 1694). From the outset the connection between electoral activity and the rise of a virulent political press can be discerned. During the succeeding twenty years there were ten general elections. This heated the political environment, and contributed enormously to the conflict between whig and tory which characterised, in particular, the years from 1701 to 1715. Daniel Defoe recognised that, with all its advantages, the triennial act had one great drawback: 'the certainty of a new election in three years is an unhappy occasion of keeping alive the divisions and party strife among the people, which otherwise would have died of course'.<sup>1</sup> The combined effect of the triennial act and the abandonment of the licensing system was a tremendous growth in the production of political literature.

Understandably enough, contemporaries were bewildered by the development of a 'fourth estate'. They were astonished by the sheer volume of political propaganda that the party presses managed to turn out. Successive administrations were at a loss when it came to dealing with the problems raised by a free press, and they were reduced to proclaiming impotently against the licentiousness of pamphlets and newspapers. But in the course of the reign of Queen Anne a government press policy began to emerge. Painstakingly, a propaganda machine was assembled by authority. In 1702 all ministerial printed matter was carried by the official newspaper, *The London Gazette*; in 1713 the Oxford ministry boasted five press organs. In addition to the *Gazette*, the *Review* addressed the whigs and the *Examiner* the tories in regular periodical essays. The *Post Boy* was a newspaper with a tory bias. The *Mercator* was devoted to the province of commerce and trade. They were supplemented by a constant flow of carefully-worded counter-

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propaganda in the form of political pamphlets, released to combat tracts potentially damaging to the image of the ministry if left unanswered.

The impetus for this changed ministerial attitude towards the press came largely from one man – Robert Harley, earl of Oxford and Mortimer, lord treasurer of Great Britain, and prime minister in all but title. He drew up the plans for the propaganda machine, and single-handed, piece by piece, he put it together. In 1704 he projected the first unofficial ministerial press organ, Defoe's *Review*, to 'state facts right',<sup>2</sup> and to counter the influence of the party writers. He recruited many of the most prominent and most effective pamphleteers of his, or indeed of any other age. Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, Charles Davenant, and John Toland, as well as a host of minor propagandists, spent long periods in his employ. Harley purposely instituted contact with the party hacks whose pot-boiling efforts kept the conflict between whig and tory at a constant high temperature.

On the practical level of the publication and distribution of propaganda, Harley owed much to his relationships with Davenant, Defoe and Swift. Davenant, in 1701, supervised Harley's own literary efforts, he saw them through the press, and he arranged for their dispersal in the provinces. Defoe established bases for the regular dissemination of pamphlets and newspapers throughout the British Isles. When his *Remarks on the Letter to the Author of the State-Memorial* was published under Harley's auspices in 1706, over 2,000 copies were dispatched to scores of pre-arranged outlets across the country – a striking comment on the degree of organisation attained while Harley was still only secretary of state.<sup>3</sup> Defoe's tours of the British mainland in Harley's service had been utilised to set up an intelligence network that allowed the extensive display of political views held by the ministers in an attempt to influence public opinion in the widest possible sense. By 1709 the *Review* was being supplied not only to the border counties and to Scotland, but also as far afield as Carrickfergus in Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

On his return to office in 1710 at the head of the ostensibly tory administration, Harley was finally in a position to put into practice the methods and theories for manipulating public opinion through the press that he had formulated in twenty years of practical politics. The recruitment of Jonathan Swift, in many ways the linchpin of Harley's propaganda machine, was equally vital in another sense. Swift's extensive connections with printers, with whom he was forever 'doing business' on the ministry's behalf, effectively complemented Harley's arrangements for the actual composition of political literature. With Swift to

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organise the printing and publication of propaganda, and with the outlets inaugurated at an earlier stage by Defoe, the Oxford ministry possessed a propaganda machine *and* an agency for the distribution of this propaganda which were the envy of the whigs. Only by 1714, under the inspired leadership of Richard Steele, did the opposition come up with an answer to the ministerial challenge, when the organising skills of Samuel Buckley, editor of *The Daily Courant*, began to combat the efficiency of the ministerial distribution agencies. Harley's press policy had, by then, demonstrated the way in which the dual weapons of propaganda and proscription could be exploited by government. Walpole built on the structure first erected by Harley, and the rise of ministerial acceptance of the 'fourth estate' can be traced back to these beginnings. The origins and development of Harley's policies in relation to the press are the basis of the present study.

Harley, then, is the focus through which propaganda and public opinion in the 'age of Swift and Defoe' are to be examined. His role is absolutely crucial to the rise of a free press in Great Britain. In saying this I do not mean to suggest that there would never have been a free press had it not been for Robert Harley. But it seems clear that, had it not been for Harley, a free press would not have existed in Great Britain as early as it did. After the expiry of the licensing act there were numerous attempts to reinstitute press censorship, and to revive, or modify, the licensing system. The latest was in 1712. In that year Harley chose to tax the press, rather than to muzzle it. Had he reintroduced restrictions, it cannot be judged how soon circumstances would again have proved conducive to their removal. The cause of the liberty of the press would have been set back by several years. Harley proved beyond reasonable doubt that government could survive under the conditions imposed by the existence of a free press. For these reasons his contribution can hardly be overestimated.

The picture would be distorted, however, if Harley's role was to be examined in complete isolation. Attention must be paid, in particular, to whig attempts to manipulate public opinion. Until Richard Steele and Samuel Buckley took charge of whig propaganda in 1713 in response to the terrific ministerial initiative, the chief rival to Harley in the field had been John, Lord Somers of the Junto. He, too, was an innovator. In 1701 he organised a brilliant propaganda campaign to discredit the government, and to force an early general election. Penning pamphlets himself, and commissioning others, Somers instituted a direct appeal to

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public opinion in a series of seminal publications. *Jura Populi Anglicani* and *The Elector's Right Asserted* indicate, by their very titles, Somers's sophisticated conception of the importance of the opinion of the 'people' in the early eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

It is no coincidence that Harley and Somers were often compared by contemporaries. They were bitter rivals. In 1712 the third earl of Shaftesbury, lamenting the whigs' lack of a 'genius' equal to Harley, observed that only Somers had been able to give him a run for his money.<sup>6</sup> By then Somers was too frail to take up the gauntlet finally accepted by Steele. A tolerably satisfactory picture of the political press in the twenty years after the expiry of the licensing act can be drawn by sketching the activities of Harley and Somers, and their methods and achievements will be compared and contrasted more than once in the following analysis. But Somers never attempted to operate a comprehensive press policy. His approach consisted of supplying pamphlets to meet each separate contingency as it occurred. There are few indications that he devoted time and energy to the development of the techniques of propaganda and counter-propaganda *when in office*. Harley, on the other hand, was always ready to adapt good ideas to his own purposes. Many of the most original notions of Somers can subsequently be seen at work under Harley's auspices. The attitude of the electorate could not be ignored under the triennial system, especially after Somers had deliberately brought public opinion into play in 1701. It had become a force to be reckoned with in British politics.

A vast corpus of tory literature, distinct from whig and Harleyite propaganda, was also published in the early eighteenth century. While it is true that at various times (in 1701, in 1708 and 1709, and from the end of 1710 onwards) it is difficult to distinguish tory propaganda from Harleyite propaganda, Harley did not attempt to control the output from the ranks of tory pamphleteers. The tory party was far more heterogeneous than the whig. There was no coordinating group to assume the mantle of the Junto on the whig side. Harley was the most important organiser in the tory party in many ways, and he was not really a true-blue tory. Similarly, excluding Harley, there was no leading figure to concert tory propaganda. Politicians like Sir Humphry Mackworth planned the publication of series of pamphlets, but he did not control the mass of tory writings in any way. The task was beyond a single man. The tory reaction to the Sacheverell trial is sufficient to illustrate this basic fact. The High Church deluge swamped the handful of pamphlets published in 1710 that can be said to be genuinely Harleyite, and few

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can be grouped together with any certainty, and attributed to this tory cabal or that (see chapter 5, 'The tory resurrection, 1708–1710').

With these qualifications in mind, any treatment of propaganda and public opinion in the age of Swift and Defoe must be selective. A blanket coverage of every pamphlet debate is clearly impossible, especially if we are to keep the focus of attention on Harley's press policies. Englishmen were proverbially interested in politics. 'Nothing more nearly concerns Englishmen', wrote one pamphleteer of the period, 'than to be well acquainted with the state of their own country from time to time'.<sup>7</sup> Conditions in this, 'the first age of Party',<sup>8</sup> were particularly conducive to the rise of a political press, and everything conspired to assist in its development. Englishmen craved political information. It was not, of course, given impartially. Information meant propaganda. Propaganda was designed to influence electoral opinion. We may call it public opinion. On occasions it really was public opinion. Geoffrey Holmes writes that the franchise was given to 'roughly one in every five adult males in the country'.<sup>9</sup> The ratio of 1:4 is surprisingly large. W. A. Speck notes 'that the electoral system was more representative in Anne's reign than it had ever been before, or was to be again until well into Victoria's'.<sup>10</sup>

The years from 1701 to 1715 – those in which the press made its most spectacular growth in the public imagination – witnessed the most severe party conflict, as party considerations permeated every feature of English society. Party conflict was to be seen at work not only at the centre of power, but in the constituencies.<sup>11</sup> Party prejudice was given free rein in frequent elections. In addition to local elections, there were seven general elections between 1701 and 1715. Geoffrey Holmes has posed a question peculiarly relevant to the present study. 'Granted that the votes of the electors in these years were immensely influential', he writes, 'how accurately did these votes, and the great political changes they wrought, reflect what we should call the "public opinion" of the day?'<sup>12</sup> The party politicians and their propagandists firmly adhered to a conception of 'the will of the people'.<sup>13</sup> Somers deliberately exploited the phenomenon of opinion 'without doors' – extra-parliamentary viewpoints – against an entrenched tory majority in parliament, and he succeeded in dislodging it. Thirty years before the Excise Crisis the power of 'public opinion' was demonstrated quite conclusively, and this verdict was endorsed in 1710. The Sacheverell affair was another example of *vox populi*. A brief analysis of election results provides proof. As Professor Holmes concludes: 'In the thirty years after 1685 . . . there

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was not one Election of the twelve fought in that period which failed to produce a House of Commons initially at least in tune with the mood of the nation at the time'.<sup>14</sup>

Political literature reached a very wide audience. Ned Ward claimed that the *Review* was 'read most by cobblers and by porters'.<sup>15</sup> Undoubtedly this was meant to be derogatory, but Charles Leslie, author of *The Rehearsal*, painted a graphic picture of the *Review*'s readership:<sup>16</sup>

the greatest part of the people do not read books, most of them cannot read at all. But they will gather together about one that can read, and listen to an *Observer* or *Review* (as I have seen them in the streets) where all the principles of rebellion are instilled into them.

Defoe chose to write in a style which was avowedly 'explicit, easy, free and very plain'. He refused to be bullied by 'those gentlemen who are critics in style, method, or manner'.<sup>17</sup> His audience, in this way, was potentially very wide. In 1712 one printed petition against the institution of a tax on newspapers pointed out that they were bought principally by 'the poorer sort of people. . . by reason of [their] cheapness, to divert themselves, and also to allure therewith their young children, and entice them to read'.<sup>18</sup> A fanciful picture perhaps, but it has been convincingly demonstrated that the lower classes would be unable to purchase fiction, or even the dearer political pamphlets. Instead, as Cesar de Saussure observed in 1726, shoeblocks pooled resources 'to purchase a newspaper', while 'workmen habitually begin the day by going to coffee-rooms in order to read the latest news'.<sup>19</sup>

The question of circulation is a knotty one. If contemporaries believed that the halfpenny newspapers were bought by the 'poorer sort of people', the regular periodical essays – Defoe's *Review*, Tutchin's *Observer* – were supposedly taken by 'a middle sort of people in our nation, that take things upon trust; these read the weekly papers, and oft-times find poison, instead of diversion'.<sup>20</sup> The *Review* and the *Observer* were not newspapers. They provided commentary on political matters already reported elsewhere. The *Review* (like the *Examiner*) resembled the leading article of the newspaper of today. Tutchin's paper, on the other hand, was narrated in dialogue between two characters called the 'Observer' and the 'Countryman'. Two tory papers also used dialogue, William Pittis's *Heracitus Ridens* and Charles Leslie's *Rehearsal* (originally called *The Rehearsal of Observer*). It was a popular format. Defoe used it in 1705 in the *London Post* in a section called 'Truth and Honesty', and in 1708, when the fortunes of the *Review* were waning, 'Mr *Review*' held a regular discourse with the 'Mad Man'.

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Different papers were directed at different audiences, then, and for this reason their format was not consistent. The provincial clergy and gentry could ignore printed papers altogether. John Dyer's manuscript newsletters catered specifically for their taste, and they were sent all over the kingdom. If they wished, the tory country gentlemen could supplement Dyer with Abel Roper's *Post Boy*, and circulation figures of around 3,000 per issue suggest that many did. Whig sympathisers could read news with a whig bias in George Ridpath's *Flying Post*. Samuel Buckley's *Daily Courant* was also slanted towards the whigs, and even Jacques de Fonvive's *Post Man*, widely considered the most reliable newspaper of its day, revealed a whig inclination, despite being ostensibly impartial. The periodical essayists were in contrast to the news reporters. They were the genuine propagandists. Defoe and Swift aimed not merely at influencing public opinion, but at uniting party political opinion within parliament.

As this would suggest, Harley was concerned with reaching at least two distinct audiences. First, and, in some instances, foremost, were the MPs themselves. Harley never neglected the potential of printed propaganda to stimulate a united stance in parliament on issues of importance. Swift's *Examiner* essays and his *Conduct of the Allies*, as we shall see, aimed at both the readership 'without doors', and 'within'. But other Harleyite propagandists were concerned more specifically with *public* opinion. The audiences of Swift and Defoe, Mr *Examiner* and Mr *Review*, were vastly different, even though both were employed by Harley.<sup>21</sup> The archetypal tory was a monarchist, and an adherent of the Church of England. He believed in the doctrines of passive obedience and non-resistance despite the Glorious Revolution. As a result of his acceptance of the divine right of kings, he was potentially Jacobite. For eleven of the years between 1701 and 1715 England was at war with France. In many ways the War of the Spanish Succession was also a war for the *English* succession. The archetypal tory lived off rents, and he was suspicious of the monied men of the City. He was xenophobic and isolationist. These factors, when added to his Jacobite inclinations, meant that he was habitually unenthusiastic about the war.

Clearly Defoe, in the *Review*, did not address these men from 1710 onwards. Swift did. Defoe was to cater for the whigs. The archetypal whig sought to curtail the prerogative of the Crown. In religion he was more inclined to champion the cause of the Protestant Dissenters from the Church of England, if he was not actually a dissenter himself. He did not subscribe to the close relationship between Church and State

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that was such an important feature of the tory creed. Benjamin Hoadly, bishop of Bangor, and no mean political writer himself, provided a clue to the Low Church viewpoint in his sermon on the text: 'My kingdom is not of this world'. Yet the archetypal whig was fiercely anti-Catholic. The act of settlement, in which he firmly believed, entailed the throne in the Protestant line – even though George I was fifty-seventh in strict line of succession. Taking this theory to its logical conclusion, the archetypal whig might have followed John Locke in assuming that, instead of constituting a divine order, monarchy originated as a contract between the king and the people. It was clear that if this was the case, the contract could be dissolved, and the king resisted, if he failed to govern within the bounds of the unwritten 'ancient constitution'.<sup>22</sup>

As a result of his anxiety over the safety of the Protestant Succession the archetypal whig was totally committed to the war on the continent, in all its ramifications, including the Dutch alliance. When the Oxford ministry made determined efforts to make peace with France, it had to contest every inch with the whig opposition. The war was largely financed through the offices of the men of the City. In this way a connection (and one that had basis in fact) was made between the whigs and monied men. It did not take much for the tory propagandists in general, and for Swift in particular, to hint at a conspiracy between the whigs and the stockjobbers who made a killing out of the prolongation of hostilities. 'If you would discover a concealed tory, Jacobite, or Papist', Shaftesbury advised, 'speak but of the Dutch, and you will find him out by his passionate railing'.<sup>23</sup> The archetypes, of course, were greatly exaggerated, although individual whigs and tories can be found to fit the most extreme descriptions. Of more importance to our purposes is the use the party propagandists made of these archetypes. Readers of Dyer's newsletter, or Roper's *Post Boy*, or Swift's *Conduct of the Allies*, genuinely believed that the whigs were the embodiment of republican, atheistical doctrines. On their side, the readers of the *Flying Post* and Steele's *Crisis* evidently felt that the tories were Jacobites and Catholics to a man, just waiting for an opportunity to restore James III and impose Popery on the entire population. Symbols are crucial to successful propaganda.

It is doubtful if Defoe's *Review* ever reached a circulation of 1,000 copies per edition.<sup>24</sup> As Henry Snyder remarks, 'the influence of a newspaper was not necessarily proportionate to its circulation'.<sup>25</sup> The *Review* and the *Observer* were coffee-house journals. A single copy could, of course, be read by more than one person. Coffee-houses placed



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regular subscriptions to journals for the convenience of their clientele. Addison, by a ‘modest computation’, estimated that each copy of the *Spectator* was, on average, read by twenty people.<sup>26</sup> On the institution of the stamp act in 1712 the *Spectator* was selling at approximately 2,000 copies per edition. Although the editors believed the pre-tax circulation to have been almost double this figure, it suggests a total readership of not much less than 50,000 people. While Addison’s figure does not inspire confidence, the *Review* and the *Observer* in 1705, like the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* at a later date, were ‘still the entertainment of most coffee-houses in town’.<sup>27</sup> Even if we accept that the *Review* never really exceeded a figure of 500 an edition (although by 1705, 100 *Reviews* were being sent ‘every time’ to Defoe’s agent in Norwich, John Fransham),<sup>28</sup> it indicates a far from negligible readership. Defoe, naturally enough, was prone to exaggerate his audience. ‘There are a hundred thousand people in this kingdom’, he wrote in 1706, ‘that read a *Review* with some pleasure and application’.<sup>29</sup>

Concrete figures, unfortunately, are hard to come by. For the *Review* we have tentative suggestions for both ends of its long career. One, a 1704 estimate, speaks of 400 per issue, while the records of the stamp duty in 1712 and 1713 reveal a similar circulation of 425 to 500.<sup>30</sup> This makes the assumption, of course, that the returns were reasonably accurate, and that papers distributed without being printed on stamped paper formed an insignificant proportion of each edition. This is purely an assumption. We have no means of testing the hypothesis. In 1712–13 it is almost certain that the *Review* was in an absolute decline.<sup>31</sup> But the reign of Queen Anne was the ‘golden age’ of the periodical essay. Remarking how *The Rambler* ‘grew upon the public estimation’, Boswell noted that Johnson’s paper had a ‘sale’ which ‘far exceeded that of any other periodical paper since the reign of Queen Anne’.<sup>32</sup> The figures we do have would appear to uphold this reputation of the periodical essay’s popularity in the age of Swift and Defoe.

At the beginning of 1695 only one newspaper was being published regularly – the official *London Gazette*. Soon it was supplemented by Roper’s *Post Boy*, Ridpath’s *Flying Post*, and Fonvive’s *Post Man*. All of the newcomers were published three times a week. In 1702 they were joined by the first daily newspaper, the *Daily Courant*, and, in 1706, by the first evening paper, the *Evening Post*. The 1704 estimate of circulation for these newspapers (excluding, of course, the *Evening Post*) appears to be moderate. The *Daily Courant*’s sales figure was put at 800 per issue, the *Flying Post*’s at 400, while their tory rival, the *Post Boy*,

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enjoyed extensive party readership and sales of 3,000 each edition. The *Post Man* was the most successful with a circulation estimated at 3,800 each weekday edition (Tuesday and Thursday) and 4,000 on Saturdays. The total sales of newspapers at this time was reckoned to be about 44,000 a week. By 1712 this figure had shot up to between 67,000 and 78,000. Of course the circulation suffered a temporary decline on the institution of the stamp duty, but the overall growth is unmistakable. The circulation of none of the papers we are discussing went down until after 1712. The *Post Boy* and the *Post Man* maintained their impressive figures. The whig journals increased their share of the market, the *Daily Courant* by perhaps 100 or 200 an issue, the *Flying Post*, which had assumed the mantle of the principal whig propaganda organ, by about 1,000 per edition.<sup>33</sup>

One reason for the tremendous overall growth in circulation was the success of, first, *The Tatler*, and then *The Spectator*. Despite the whig bias of both journals, they were read, the latter in particular, by more than merely die-hard whigs. Both Steele's estimate of the sale of the *Spectator*, and the records of tax returns indicate a production and distribution of around 2,000 a day, six days a week. On its own, then, the *Spectator* accounted for perhaps 12,000 of the gross increase in circulation from 44,000 to around 70,000. Yet it is evident, nonetheless, that the principal cause of the development of the newspaper industry was political, whether in the wider sense of concern for the state of the nation, and the desire for information, or simply for literature with a more or less blatant political slant. The absence of restrictions permitted the treatment of a wider range of political and religious subjects. Previously newspapers had not been allowed to comment on the news they reported. True, the printing of parliamentary debates was a delicate matter, and was to remain so for many years. But the introduction of periodical essays of the stamp of the *Review* and, later, the *Examiner* encouraged the free discussion in print of important political issues.

The most significant development is perhaps to be seen in the production and publication of pamphlets and poems on affairs of state. In 1710 the Sacheverell trial precipitated a paper war of immense proportions. F. F. Madan's bibliography of Sacheverelliana lists over 500 titles.<sup>34</sup> Twelve years earlier the standing army controversy, for all its nationwide interest, stimulated between forty and fifty publications in two years.<sup>35</sup> Ian Maxted suggests that publishing in the eighteenth century peaked around 1714, at least in terms of the number of individual books published, if not in sales figures.<sup>36</sup> Again the question of