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0521662079 - Press, Politics and the Public Sphere in Europe and North America, 1760-1820

Edited by Hannah Barker and Simon Burrows

Excerpt

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Introduction

Hannah Barker and Simon Burrows

As a vital component of print culture, newspapers feature prominently in most recent accounts of social and political change in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This is as true for historians exploring the new ‘cultural interpretation’ of the French Revolution as it is for those studying Europe’s emergent middle classes or the commercialisation of Western culture. Yet despite the priority both historians and contemporaries have attributed to the influence of the newspaper press, its role is poorly integrated into most narrative accounts, and not enough is known about the press itself, especially in terms of national comparison.¹ This is particularly problematic given the central role that many historians attribute to newspapers in the formation of ‘public opinion’ and a pan-European ‘public sphere’ independent of government but critical of the actions of authority.²

This book seeks to address this need by offering a number of nationally based case studies, assessing their common features and divergences and exploring the role of the newspaper in political and social change. The choice of ‘national boundaries’ as organising categories serves an essential purpose here, because the political and legal frameworks which defined the parameters and possibilities of the press, as well as the broad contours of societies and economies, were to a high degree co-extensive with national borders, even in ancien regime Europe. Furthermore, the extent and processes by which nationhood was defined from the 1760s to the 1820s rank among the most problematic and pressing issues confronting historians of the period, and accounts of the processes of nation-building and defining national identity often privilege the press.³ Within our predominantly ‘national’ framework, chapters covering communities lacking statehood (Ireland and pre-revolutionary America), geographic units incorporating many states (Germany and Italy) and a chapter on the cosmopolitan press offer varied perspectives on links between the press and shifting senses of community and national identity.

Many recent press studies have stressed the extent to which newspapers and the political and print cultures in which they arise help to

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define one another. Thus, the study of the press cannot be isolated from the broader contexts in which it operates. Different contexts can lead to considerable divergences, even at a single historical moment.⁴ In considering a representative range of national press cultures, contributors to this volume take a variety of approaches. They examine the structure of the press; the methods used to control it by political authorities and their effectiveness; the journalistic texts themselves; and the political role of newspapers within the public sphere, however defined. They investigate who owned the papers, who wrote for them, how they were distributed and who read them, and attempt to assess how far audience composition and the social backgrounds of journalists, editors and proprietors determined the nature of the messages the press contained. They also investigate how far newspaper circulations, regularity of publication, audience size, price, marketing methods and availability determined the social and geographic penetration of newspapers, their level of independence from patronage and their political roles. Moreover, they describe the journalistic texts, their presentation and format, the topics they covered, the way issues were presented and the messages, overt and implicit, that they contained. Such a comprehensive approach to the comparative role of national newspaper presses reveals important differences. Divergent press traditions helped to shape radically different national political cultures, calling many generalisations about the role of the press into question. Our approach also recognises that different national presses developed according to national political chronologies, and thus allowed our contributors a certain flexibility about end-dates. In particular, we felt that abrupt changes in political circumstances during the revolutionary period so altered press regimes in several countries that it made no sense to offer a unitary coverage of the whole period 1760–1820. Thus, there are separate chapters on pre-revolutionary and revolutionary France, and discussion of those states where the vestiges of press liberty were extinguished by Napoleonic expansion – the Netherlands and Italy – ends around 1800. However, the subsequent experience of these states from 1800 until the restoration fits within the broader narrative outlined in the chapter on the cosmopolitan press. Despite these divergences of experience, as European and American national presses grew from common origins, and common analytical frameworks have influenced the academic study of their development, it is possible to raise common themes here.

When newspapers began to emerge in the early seventeenth century, they were the product of a relatively mature print culture, which according to Marshall McLuhan, was already shaping the entire experience of Western civilisation.⁵ Drawing upon a variety of disciplines, McLuhan suggested that the impact of the invention of movable type printing

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(as developed by Gutenberg in the mid-fifteenth century) was not limited to its technological advantages: by restructuring modes of communication it also restructured social and cultural practices, intellectual habits and cognition itself. Building on McLuhan's approach, Elizabeth Eisenstein attempts to identify, define and explore the precise nature of the shift from oral and manuscript culture to print.⁶ Eisenstein argues that as print increased dissemination exponentially, it amplified messages and made standardisation possible. It led to the reorganisation of texts and reference guides, promoting rationalisation, codification and cataloguing of information and new processes of data collection. Whereas continual copying of manuscripts in scribal culture led to the cumulative corruption of texts, print culture allowed for processes of feedback, correction and improved editions. Printing also greatly improved the preservation of data, fixing the knowledge base, and reinforcing messages and stereotypes through amplification and repetition. Access to this knowledge base was through the ever-improving world of the printed text. There, solitary practices of reading and research replaced the shared oral knowledge of the past, promoting the retreat into increasingly 'private worlds' that historians have detected in the early modern period. The development of habits of critical thought through comparison and criticism of multiple texts promoted intellectual and religious fragmentation as critical analysis of texts considered authoritative in the Middle Ages called their authority into question. When combined with the propaganda potential of the printing press to disseminate such findings, printing became a major force behind the success of the Reformation and the secularisation of European society. Printing also appeared to be a prerequisite of the evolution of new forms of political and social organisation, especially nation states predicated on the twin pillars of bureaucratic administration and political consent founded upon a national community of identity expressed primarily through the medium of print.⁷

Although Eisenstein's approach has been criticised, not least by Adrian Johns, as being too deterministic and overplaying print's fixity and claims to authority, the implications of the influence of multiple texts remain vital, especially with regard to the spread of news.⁸ Yet, sadly, as Mitchell Stephens has pointed out, Eisenstein almost ignores the journalistic uses of print.⁹ However, following lines suggested by Eisenstein's analysis, other historians have explored the historical implications of serial production. As some of the first disposable, mass-produced products, news publications have been implicated in the development of new modes of production. They were also the most important forum for the development of modern advertising. Serial publications offered a regular point of contact between producers and their potential clients and made possible

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the evolution and practice of mass marketing, branding and promoting new products.¹⁰ They also helped to restructure a reader's sense of time and space, creating an impression of engagement with a wider continuous drama of 'public' events, within which their lives and communities took on new meanings and political participation became thinkable. By the early nineteenth century, if not sooner, these processes were beginning to provide the basis for an emerging modern, democratic, consumer society, albeit one initially restricted socially and geographically. Thus, most cultural historians would agree that the shift to a culture based on print is heavily implicated in almost every significant change connected with the advent of political and social modernity.

The place of the newspaper press within this culture of print underwent fundamental shifts during the eighteenth century. In many places, though at different moments, the newspaper began to supersede the pamphlet as the dominant printed form for political discourse and the dissemination of news. At the same time, it began to occupy a more prominent position alongside other institutions and social networks which both informed and articulated public debate. However, defining what does – or does not – constitute a 'newspaper' is problematic. Exact definitions of appearance, periodicity, content and format usually raise more difficulties than they resolve.¹¹ Contributors to this work take a varied approach to this problem, though all assume that newspapers are printed publications that appear frequently, at regular intervals, in dated (or numbered) instalments, containing a miscellaneous variety of stories per issue in a consistent and recognisable format. They should be available to the general public, usually for sale individually or by subscription, and attempt to provide readers with a regular diet of the most up-to-date news available. Nevertheless, for practical purposes, what constitutes a newspaper varies according to context. By the mid-eighteenth century, daily newspapers were available in some European countries, but elsewhere bi-weekly, weekly, fortnightly or even monthly political periodicals still functioned as the primary news media. Thus, in a British context Hannah Barker is concerned primarily with broad-sheet publications appearing with daily to weekly frequency, and can ignore monthly periodicals and 'reviews' which were, in general, not as central to news transmission and political opinion formation. In contrast, Miranda Beaven Remnek's chapter on Russia, where the daily press was small and lacking in political importance, is concerned largely with the monthly 'thick press', which often contained the freshest news available.¹² In some other national contexts, including Ireland and pre-revolutionary France, both sorts of journals seem to have been important, fulfilling different functions. Yet these differences in format in themselves are indicative, as our contributors

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show, of significant variations in the contours of the ‘public sphere’, the tempo of news transmission and the pulse of political and economic life, as well as in the relationships between editors and readers, rulers and subjects.

Although newspapers only began to take their full modern form in the early eighteenth century, they were the outcome of a long evolutionary process. Indeed, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss the desire for news (‘communication of messages’) is a basic human trait, part of the communication process that binds cultures together.¹³ The earliest European news organs were hand-written official news bulletins in ancient Rome.¹⁴ Although after the fall of the Roman Empire, European communications, trade and news networks collapsed, there was a revival of international demand for news in the later Middle Ages and Renaissance. In part, this was driven by the development of a world-wide trade in European hands and ever more sophisticated speculative means to finance it. Consequently, reliable news information became an increasingly valuable commodity, as merchants and financiers tried to ensure they received the best possible prices and attempted to make accurate assessments of risk. Hence, great commercial centres, where news was both most available and of greatest value, became the largest and most innovative journalistic centres, led by Venice in the sixteenth century, Amsterdam in the seventeenth century and London in the eighteenth century.¹⁵

The first ‘newspapers’ evolved from hand-written Venetian *Gazzette*. These *Gazzette* originally appeared in the mid-sixteenth century, and pioneered the publication of a diverse set of reports, each under the dateline of its place of origin, in a single issue. The format of the *Gazzette* was extremely influential, and remained commonplace for over two centuries. By 1609, however, printed newsbooks were appearing in Germany, and around 1620, Dutch printers began to produce weekly printed papers, known as *corantos*, in Dutch, English and French.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the market for news to which this nascent press catered was small and developed slowly. The first printed ‘newspapers’ would probably have had circulations in the low hundreds and tended to appear only weekly.¹⁷ Even in the eighteenth century, French provincial newspapers could break even at 200–50 copies and give their publishers a moderate but respectable living on 400–50.¹⁸ In America, the *Boston News-Letter*, although successful, had an initial print-run of just 250 in 1704.¹⁹ Despite the commercial possibilities of a relatively low circulation, daily newspaper publication still spread slowly, hindered by licensing and censorship regimes and the challenge of acquiring sufficient material. The first daily paper, the *Einkommende Zeitung*, was published in Leipzig in 1650. A London daily did not appear until 1702, France did not have

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a successful daily until 1777, and America's first daily only appeared in 1783.²⁰ A weekly provincial press developed in England from 1701 and in France from the 1750s, but both drew much of their political news from the metropolitan press.²¹

Early newspapers were also limited because of the available technology. Essentially the presses used in the eighteenth century were the same as those used by Gutenberg three centuries earlier, with only minor adaptations. These presses could seldom produce more than 250 impressions per hour.²² Speed of output could only be increased by adding another press, which required hiring an additional printer and compositor. Thus, prior to the technological advances of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, printers gained no significant economies of scale by increasing existing capacity. Even late eighteenth-century innovations such as the Stanhope press and the Columbian press only marginally increased the speed of production. With the introduction of the König steam press, first used to print *The Times* of 29 November 1814, it became possible to greatly increase output. König's machine impressed 1,100 pages per hour, but by 1830 steam-driven machines could produce 4,000 imprints per hour.²³ Nevertheless, it was some years before demand levels were sufficient for successful newspapers elsewhere to switch to steam presses.

The steam press accelerated the transformation of newspaper production into a large-scale capital intensive industry, especially after the construction of steam railways from the 1830s onwards made it possible for metropolitan daily papers to serve truly national audiences. But this transformation of newspapers into larger enterprises was already under way, in Britain at least, by 1800. For much of the eighteenth century it required very little capital to establish a successful newspaper. Many early newspapers were published and edited by their printers, but over time the roles of editor, printer and sometimes proprietor became separate. By the later eighteenth century most London newspapers were large-scale capital enterprises with several shareholders, a salaried editor and a small staff of journalists.²⁴ Elsewhere, newspapers were often smaller ventures. In the early nineteenth century, American townships with populations as low as 300 had their own newspapers run by a single printer-editor and many French revolutionary publications were established by editor-proprietors who were the sole-journalists.²⁵ Before steam transport, most newspapers tended to serve predominantly local audiences; for example, the majority of Parisian newspapers and periodicals produced in the Revolution were sold in the metropolis.²⁶

Yet if newspapers tended to serve geographically defined communities, the information sources they used to compile their texts were international. In the late eighteenth century modern reporting practices

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were still in their infancy and staff correspondents virtually unknown. Nor were there any specialist agencies collecting and circulating news. Nevertheless, there was a wide variety of sources of information available to the press, forming what Jeremy Black has called ‘a far from enclosed system of information’.²⁷ Early newspapers relied above all on foreign newspapers and hand-written news letters, which they recycled shamelessly. Journalists also sought up-to-date information from private and mercantile correspondence, books and printed ephemera, travellers’ and merchants’ reports, coffee-house gossip and other oral sources. The unreliable nature of some of this material was indicated by the use of ubiquitous phrases such as ‘we hear’ or its French equivalent ‘*on dit*’ in much newspaper reporting.²⁸ However, by the mid-eighteenth century, journalists could also draw on official publications including government gazettes, and often published the full text of important documents, leaving readers to interpret them. But increasingly, journalists began to find an editorial voice and to print their own material and analysis. *The Times* was a leader in this field, sending staff to cover the French Revolution from Paris.²⁹ International newspapers like the *Gazette de Leyde* and *Courier de l’Europe* appear to have used paid correspondents in foreign cities even earlier.³⁰ Nevertheless, they, like many European newspapers, continued to present news in a series of dry, diplomatic-style dispatches under their (putative) cities of origin and a dateline well into the nineteenth century. In some cases papers did not even give news of their own city, probably both because it was liable to censorship and because local news still circulated through local networks by oral means.³¹

Governments and political elites had many ways to restrict the circulation and content of news. Licensing regulations, prior censorship and restrictive privileges were widespread practices. In the Netherlands, papers required a privilege to publish and discussion of Dutch internal affairs was restricted until the Patriot Revolution of 1783–7.³² In ancien régime France, French political news could not be printed at all unless it was reproduced from the sterile *Gazette de France* (and at a fee for breach of privilege); under Napoleon after 1807 uncensored papers could only take political news from the official *Moniteur*.³³ Patronage rewards, political subsidy, bribery and fees to publish or suppress items were common even where instruments of prior censorship or licensing systems did not exist. Moreover, libel and sedition laws were often draconian. In Britain the authors, editors, publishers and hawkers of newspapers could all be imprisoned and pilloried in cases of criminal libel, and until Fox’s ‘Libel Act’ of 1792, the decision of guilt rested with the judge, not a jury. In other states journalists could be imprisoned at the sovereign’s pleasure. Such was the fate of over 800 publishers and writers

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in ancien regime France, including the journalists Jacques-Pierre Brissot and Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet.³⁴ Moreover, although there were increasing debates in many European countries about the liberty to publish and the benefits of a free press which challenged absolutist practices of secret government, support for the idea of a totally unfettered media was novel. Prior to the ratification of the First Amendment in the United States in 1791, no country in the Western world granted their citizens freedom of printed expression as a basic right.³⁵ Even when it was granted it proved a precarious liberty. In France the freedom of expression enshrined in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen lasted only from August 1789 to August 1792; in the United States the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 were used to persecute Republican editors for several years.³⁶

However, despite the fact that governments often feared the subversive potential of the press, and might try to control it, newspapers often enjoyed a greater freedom than other legally printed products, partly because old regime governments tended to lack the machinery to monitor the newspaper press effectively. But governments also needed the press, especially international newspapers, to persuade or influence policymakers and the political nation in other states. To do this effectively, they had to use news channels that enjoyed that public's confidence, which in turn required that they use the most reputable news organs: those which maintained the appearance of independence by publishing documents from both parties to a dispute. In attempting to persuade, moreover, governments tacitly accepted the legitimacy of the judgements of a 'public', however limited. As the eighteenth century wore on, governments thus began to develop news management techniques rather than attempting to suppress information.³⁷ Many countries also sought to restrict access to newspapers, sometimes by insisting on sale by subscription, sometimes, as in Britain, by 'taxes on knowledge'. But newspapers, by their very nature, were a poor and unlikely medium for truly subversive materials, since they needed to maintain a fixed office and regular impression, and could be suppressed easily or intercepted in the post, the main means of newspaper distribution beyond metropolitan areas.

Despite lingering worries about the effects of the press and other forms of print on the lower orders, governments were beginning to encourage increased educational provision, and literacy was rising across most of Europe. Although determining the potential literate audience is fraught with difficulties, and even the most basic measures of literacy remain problematic,³⁸ it is still possible to make some broad generalisations. Literacy was highest in north-western Europe, where by 1800 over half of adult males in most areas could sign their names – the standard measure

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of basic literacy used by historians – and more still had simple reading ability. England and Scotland, north-eastern France, Germany and Scandinavia could even boast low-level mass literacy skills, unlike the Iberian peninsula, Mediterranean basin, Russia and eastern and central Europe. In France literacy rates were high but uneven. In one north-eastern town male signature literacy was already 83 per cent in 1700. By the eve of the Revolution, 60 per cent of women in north-eastern France were also literate. In contrast, in the south and west, where resistance to the Revolution was strongest, literacy rates were considerably lower, perhaps preventing the penetration of new, revolutionary ideas. Literacy levels were also low in much of Ireland, where 90 per cent female illiteracy was the norm. However, literacy almost everywhere was on an upward trend, in marked contrast to earlier periods, though progress was often slow. German records suggest that 10 per cent of those over six years old could read with ease by 1750 and around 25 per cent by 1800. Within populations, it is possible also to make generalisations about the structure of literacy rates. Usually the most literate were concentrated at the top of the social scale, men were more literate than women and the young more literate than the old. Urban populations tended to be more literate than rural ones, since they had more access to educational opportunities and greater everyday contact with printed matter. In London by the 1750s, 92 per cent of bridegrooms and 74 per cent of brides could sign their names. In Amsterdam, 85 per cent of bridegrooms could sign their names by 1780.³⁹ In addition, by the late 1700s, some continental states, following an example set by Prussia in 1717, were beginning to decree systems of universal primary education, although in practice the results were limited.⁴⁰ Thus, by the late eighteenth century, there was already a potential mass reading ‘public’ for newspapers, drawn from a wide cross-section of society in many European states.

But the literate were not the only consumers of print culture. Sharing newspapers and reading them aloud in coffee houses or other public places were common practices in the eighteenth century. Contemporary accounts – as most of our contributors note – suggest that on average each copy of a newspaper was consumed by several readers, perhaps as many as a dozen or more. Thus, reconstructing the size of the audience, its geographic and social location, and how and how frequently they consumed newspapers would be a problem for historians even if adequate financial records and subscription lists had survived. If the precise size and character of the audience for print was and remains unclear, many contemporaries were still convinced of its importance. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, editors and journalists often referred to their audience as the ‘public’ and invoked the concept of ‘public opinion’

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when discussing the legitimacy of acts of authority. But both they and subsequent historians have often been vague about the nature of 'public opinion', how it operated, and to whom it belonged. Evidently it did not include the whole population, and indeed the 'public' was often juxtaposed against its other, the 'mob'. But was this 'public' a mere concept, or was there some sort of reality behind it – did consumers of print and the press that 'represented' them genuinely participate in policy formation? If so, was membership of this 'participatory public' in practice defined primarily through involvement with the press, and was it co-extensive with newspaper readership? Or was it restricted to a narrower group of readers who contributed articles or letters to newspapers, wrote tracts, or perhaps had access to officials and policy-makers? Then again, it might be a broader group, comprising not only regular readers of newspapers, but those who met and discussed political issues in coffee shops, Masonic lodges, taverns, salons and the other focal points of eighteenth-century urban culture.

If 'public opinion' did influence political life, how was it structured? Was it an essentially unitary consensual force, as many contemporary writers including Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued, and most French revolutionaries seem tragically to have believed? Or was it divided and fragmentary? If so, how could a fragmentary 'public opinion' operate in monarchical states which were by nature unitary? Was 'public opinion' the outcome of enlightened, disinterested debate and hence the embodiment of reason, as both Immanuel Kant and Rousseau seemed to believe, or was it ultimately contestable and malleable as the propagandists described by Keith Michael Baker and their patrons seemed to have intuited?⁴¹ The profoundest meditations on these topics are those of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas on the development of a 'bourgeois public sphere' (*bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*).⁴² This has provided many historians with a theoretical basis from which to explore the political culture of the ancien regime.

For Habermas, the political public sphere was part of a specific stage in early capitalist commercial relations. It was directly linked to the growth of a self-conscious bourgeoisie and the emergence of a 'reasoning public' which could be critical of administration and sought to influence political power. The space within which this new public operated – 'the tension-charged field of state-society relations' – was the public sphere.⁴³ The public sphere was dependent upon new networks of communications on two levels. First, because factors like a press and a reading public allowed the exchange of information and ideas. Second, these developments themselves created a new institutional context for political action. Habermas argues that the political public sphere issued directly from the