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The Rise of the Newspaper

By Will Slauter

In the late seventeenth century, most news—defined as timely reports on public affairs and commerce—did not appear in newspapers. The monarchy, church, and Parliament closely monitored discussions of politics and religion. In most years, the official *London Gazette* (1665–present) remained the only printed newspaper. A tiny elite paid for access to fuller reports found in handwritten newsletters, which were compiled in London by individuals with access to the diplomatic correspondence of the monarchy and free use of the royal post. Merchants also relied on weekly periodicals called price currents for updates on the prices of goods in various markets. But when it came to distributing news in print, periodicals were not as common as separate pamphlets, which could be produced quickly and sold cheaply on the streets, and broadsides, which contained words and images printed on one side of a sheet so that they could be attached to a wall or post for public viewing.

By the late eighteenth century, the business and culture of news had changed substantially. Admittedly, local news still traveled by word of mouth, friends in other places still provided details that could not be found in print, and pamphlets remained important tools of political persuasion. But by 1775 newspapers printed on a regular

schedule (weekly, tri-weekly, or daily) could be found in cities throughout England and North America, not to mention Scotland, Ireland, and the West Indies. These newspapers discussed public affairs more openly than their seventeenth-century counterparts, and they contained a range of material that previously appeared in distinct publications: paragraphs of foreign and domestic news, price lists and mortality figures, accounts of crimes and trials, poems and songs, reader correspondence, parliamentary proceedings, political essays, and advertisements. Pamphlets and broadsides continued to be used for late-breaking news or for certain genres, such as the last words of executed criminals. But by 1775 the newspaper had become the primary means of packaging news and selling it to customers.

From the perspective of printers and publishers, periodicals sold by subscription had several advantages over separate publications such as pamphlets and broadsides: a predictable production schedule, dedicated customers in known locations, and the promise (though not the guarantee) of steady income from sales and advertisements. Periodicity—the fact of issuing a publication on a regular schedule—encouraged the formation of a community of readers, which in turn attracted advertisers. Selling by subscription locked customers in and enabled printers to know how many copies to print and where to deliver them. Newspapers in the late eighteenth century contained much more than news, and their mix of literary, political, and commercial material increased their appeal for readers.

Still, it was not inevitable that the newspaper would become the dominant way of selling news by 1775. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries constituted a period of experimentation in the form and content of publications and in their means of

distribution. Writers, printers, and distributors of news adapted to changes in government regulations related to censorship, taxation, and postal distribution, but their actions also pushed these policies in unforeseen directions. To make the newspaper work as a viable medium, individuals exploited loopholes in tax policy, negotiated deals with postal officials (or became postmasters), diversified their businesses, and developed relationships that enabled them to collect news and distribute it to customers.

The Commercialization of News in an Age of Censorship and Monopoly

To better understand developments after 1688, the first part of this chapter provides an overview of the commercialization of news and the development of periodicity in the early to mid seventeenth century. Specialists of that period have pointed out that periodicals are artificial because events of public concern do not necessarily occur on a predictable schedule. Adherence to a weekly (and later daily) schedule created the obligation to fill every issue regardless of whether there was anything new to publish. Accounts received after an issue had gone to press either had to be held until the following week or prepared for sale in some other form, such as a broadside or pamphlet.!

A variety of broadsides existed in the seventeenth century, from proclamations issued by authority and funeral elegies commissioned by friends of the deceased to satirical poems and ballads, some of which narrated recent events. Ballad writers visited public places in search of topical material that they could put to verse, but rather than

providing a straightforward narrative of an event (such as a fire, an execution, or a battle), they tended to exploit the event to teach a moral lesson. Ballads and other broadsides could be purchased for about a penny from booksellers, peddlers, or hawkers.² Accounts of battles, treaties, crimes, and natural disasters also appeared in pamphlets, which could be produced quickly and sold on the street. The number of pamphlets tended to increase during periods of war, such as during the late 1580s, when England was at war with Spain.³

In contrast to broadsides and pamphlets, periodicals required a regular supply of news (to fill each issue) and a systematic means of distributing the final product to customers. Both of these tasks would be greatly facilitated by the development of more extensive and reliable postal routes during the seventeenth century. After 1600, improvements in the royal posts and private courier services across Europe enabled merchants, bankers, diplomats, and others to expect weekly updates from their correspondents in other cities.⁴ Regular mail delivery also made it possible for well-connected individuals to issue weekly newsletters to paying subscribers. The newsletters were written rather than printed because they catered to an elite clientele who paid handsomely for access to information that many rulers did not wish to see circulated. But the newsletters were only able to exist in the first place because diplomats and spies leaked information to the compilers, who provided them with other information in return. The compilers recorded news and rumors picked up locally, combined them with reports received from other cities, and mailed the aggregate product to their elite clients. In major trading centers like Venice and Antwerp, some of the news compilers had offices where clerks made copies for local and foreign subscribers; others worked alone with limited

means and changed locations to avoid trouble with the authorities. But by around 1620 they could be found in all the courts and trading centers of Europe.⁵

These handwritten newsletters were the basis for the first printed news periodicals. As early as 1605, Johann Carolus of Strasbourg, who already had a business copying incoming newsletters and selling them to local customers, produced a printed version for a wider audience.⁶ Printers in other cities soon imitated Carolus, but the main growth spurt came with the Thirty Years' War (1618–48), which generated demand for military news across Europe. These early printed periodicals were often called “corantos” because they provided a “current” of news from various parts of Europe (the first recorded use of the word “newspaper” was not until 1667, and the term was not commonly used before the eighteenth century).⁷ The corantos adopted the basic form of the written newsletters (short bulletins arranged by the geographic origin of the news rather than its subject) and they copied many of their reports from the newsletters, which continued to circulate. The first corantos produced in England date to 1621. They were the work of a small group of London printers and booksellers who translated Dutch corantos and printed them for local customers. There is no reliable evidence about circulation, but the print runs were probably in the low hundreds.⁸

The decision to print corantos was risky because English monarchs claimed a prerogative over all affairs of state and discouraged discussion of domestic or foreign policy. In 1620 James I reacted to publications about the European conflict by ordering his subjects “from the highest to the lowest to take heede, how they intermeddle by Penne, or Speech, with causes of State and secrets of Empire, either at home, or abroad.”⁹ He also persuaded the United Provinces to prohibit the exportation of printed corantos to

England. These measures proved ineffective in stopping the flow of news, so the king appointed a licenser to authorize weekly publications by a few select members of the Stationers' Company (the London guild of printers and booksellers). The stationers agreed to avoid discussion of English affairs and to limit themselves to translations of what had been printed on the continent. But Charles I (who became king in 1625) did not appreciate open discussion of foreign affairs either, and after a complaint by the Spanish ambassador about one of the corantos in 1632 the monarch banned them entirely. In 1638 two of the main publishers of news—Nicholas Bourne and Nathaniel Butter—obtained a royal license with the exclusive right to publish translations of foreign corantos. This privilege was meant to limit the production of news to a couple of individuals who promised to avoid printing anything against the monarchy or the church. But with no war to fuel demand for foreign news, their periodicals foundered.¹⁰

While the monarch used licensing to control news of church and state, Parliament considered it a breach of privilege to publish accounts of its proceedings. Vote counts and summaries of speeches still spread by word of mouth, through scribal newsletters and in “separates,” a term used to designate manuscripts containing a single text written up with the intention of being circulated, whether for money or not. During the 1620s, when Charles I struggled against an increasingly vociferous Parliament, enterprising scribes produced summaries of parliamentary proceedings for paying customers.¹¹ When the Civil War broke out in 1641–2, scribes gathered rumors and solicited details from Members of Parliament (who often had their own reasons for leaking information) and sold their reports in stalls near Westminster Hall. Some of these scribes began issuing “diurnals” (i.e. journals) that provided a day-by-day account of proceedings. By the

summer of 1641 printers began reproducing the manuscript diurnals, and shortly thereafter one of the leading scribes, Samuel Pecke, collaborated with a printer to issue a weekly periodical. He was soon imitated (and copied) by many other “newsbooks.” (They were called newsbooks because they were small pamphlets of eight or sixteen pages, and they often had continuous pagination, enabling readers to bind successive issues together in annual volumes.) Printing significantly reduced the cost for the purchaser. Whereas a manuscript diurnal might cost 1s. 6d., many newsbooks sold for a penny (1/18th of the price).¹²

Writers, printers, and booksellers exploited the volatile political situation in the early 1640s to produce a wide range of unlicensed publications devoted to military and political developments. Writers attended trials and criminal executions, where they recorded speeches in shorthand and rushed them into print, usually as small pamphlets or broadsides. Scaffold speeches were an important genre that enabled writers to develop many of the skills that would later be associated with reporters: writers attended the event, talked to witnesses, and recorded the words spoken.¹³ Reporting parliamentary debates remained more difficult, because the doors were closed to non-members and Parliament sought to keep the press within limits. On several occasions in 1642–3 both Houses of Parliament summoned writers, printers, and booksellers for passages that members deemed “scandalous” and several of them spent time in prison.¹⁴

In 1643, a parliamentary ordinance specified that all printed works had to be approved by Parliament and registered with the Company of Stationers. To reduce the flow of unlicensed publications, the Stationers’ Company worked with officials of the City of London to crack down on the hawkers—men, women, and children—who

distributed all sorts of cheap pamphlets, broadsides, and newsbooks. Although individual stationers probably relied on hawkers to reach more customers, the Company blamed them for selling pirated editions and scandalous books with which they did not want to be associated. At the Stationers' request, the Common Council of the City of London ordered the arrest and corporal punishment of anyone found selling books, pamphlets or papers on the street.¹⁵

Despite attempts to maintain order by Parliament, the City, and the Stationers' Company, newsbooks flourished until 1649, a year in which fifty-four different titles were published. Weekly newsbooks probably sold 250–500 copies per issue and up to 1000 copies in exceptional cases. Total readership would have been higher because copies were passed around and read aloud in public. Most newsbooks contained no paid advertisements (there were occasional ads for books being sold by the publisher of the newsbook) and so publishers relied entirely on sales for income.¹⁶ After the execution of the King and the creation of the Commonwealth, Parliament again established a strict licensing system in September 1649. The number of authorized news publications shrunk dramatically under the rule of Oliver Cromwell, and few of them dared to criticize the Lord Protector. In the first half of the 1650s there were between eight and fourteen news periodicals circulating at any one time, but in 1655 Cromwell suppressed all but two official publications.¹⁷

After the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, Parliament passed “An Act for Preventing the Frequent Abuses in Printing Seditious, Treasonable, and Unlicensed Books and Pamphlets; and for Regulating Printing Presses” (1662). This is often referred to as the Licensing Act because it required all printed matter to be licensed by a royal

editor and registered with the Stationers' Company. But the act regulated all aspects of the trade: it confirmed the Stationers' Company's monopoly, restricted printing to London, and limited the number of presses (each master printer was allowed two presses and over time the number of master printers was to be reduced to twenty).¹⁸

The secretaries of state had licensing authority over "affairs of state," which included news. In 1663 Charles II granted Roger L'Estrange, a zealous licenser, the exclusive right to print and sell "all Narratives or relations [*sic*] not exceeding two sheets of Paper & all Advertisements, Mercuries, Diurnalls & books of Publick Intelligence."¹⁹ Granting L'Estrange a monopoly on all sorts of news publications made sense to Charles II, who sought to curtail discussion of the legitimacy of the restored monarchy. But an undersecretary of state named Joseph Williamson soon set in motion a plan to replace L'Estrange's newspapers with an official publication under the direct control of the secretaries of state. In exchange for compensation, L'Estrange agreed to end his news publications early in 1666, though he retained the exclusive right to print advertisements (discussed below). Williamson's official newspaper began as the *Oxford Gazette* in November 1665 (the court was in exile there during part of the "Great Plague"), and changed its name to the *London Gazette* in February 1666.²⁰

Williamson hired an editor for the *Gazette*, but he kept the best intelligence for his own subscription newsletter business. Williamson's letters and those of his correspondents traveled postage-free, enabling him to collect news from throughout the kingdom and abroad. Hand-copied newsletters were sent out to paying subscribers and others who received them in exchange for providing intelligence. Local postmasters in particular were expected to summarize information and rumors that they found in the

letters under their care. Williamson returned the favor by sending them free copies of the *London Gazette* that they could sell to local customers. Postmasters also distributed copies to inns, taverns, and coffeehouses. In this way, the Post Office was both a means for the monarchy to disseminate its official version of events and a powerful apparatus for collecting intelligence and monitoring personal communications.²¹ Charles II responded vigorously to criticism of his policies by issuing several proclamations banning discussion of affairs of state in coffeehouses and other public places; individuals who merely listened to such “licentious talk” or “false news” were liable for punishment unless they reported it to a Justice of the Peace within twenty-four hours.²²

The *London Gazette*’s monopoly on printed news ended temporarily during the Exclusion Crisis (1678–81), when fears of a Catholic conspiracy (the so-called “Popish Plot”) led the emerging Country Party (later to be known as the Whigs) to support the exclusion of Charles II’s Catholic brother James from the throne, while the Court Party (the Tories) opposed this exclusion. A number of unlicensed pamphlets, broadsides, and newspapers appeared during this controversy, and their suppression was made more difficult by the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1679. (The Act, first passed in 1662, had to be periodically renewed, and Parliament set this aside while it attempted to exclude Charles II’s brother James from the throne.)²³ In the absence of licensing, Charles II sought to use royal prerogative to suppress the newspapers that had appeared in 1679–80. He solicited the opinions of judges, who reported to the Privy Council in May 1680 that the king could legally prohibit any news publication that he deemed a danger to public peace. Charles II immediately issued a proclamation banning the publication of news without prior authorization, but some MPs cited this as an abuse of royal authority

designed to usurp the function of Parliament. By the end of 1680, probably with the encouragement of some MPs, several Whig printers again began printing newspapers.²⁴ Roger L'Estrange defended the monarchy in a periodical called *The Observer in Question and Answer* (1681–7). After the accession of James II in 1685, Parliament renewed the Licensing Act, eliminating the unlicensed papers and leaving the *London Gazette* and L'Estrange's *Observer* as the only newspapers down to 1688. James II's administration also cracked down on the circulation of manuscript newsletters through the post and in coffeehouses.²⁵

As James II struggled to keep his grip on power, a number of pamphlets and broadsides appeared, but printed periodicals remained too risky. It was only after the king fled in December 1688 that four unlicensed newspapers were set up, and they did not last long because the new king, William III, sought to limit ongoing discussion of events. In January 1689 the *London Gazette* complained about “divers False, Scandalous and Seditious Books, Papers of News, and Pamphlets, daily Printed and Dispersed, containing idle and mistaken Relations of what passes” and explained that orders had been given “to apprehend all such Authors, Printers, Booksellers, Hawkers and others, as shall be found to Print, Sell, or Disperse the same.”²⁶ In February the monarchy appointed a Messenger of the Press to enforce licensing. The Bill of Rights of 1689 did not guarantee freedom of the press, and Parliament continued to assert its privilege of secrecy. The *London Gazette* remained the only authorized political newspaper.²⁷

Nevertheless, the Glorious Revolution could be considered a turning point for two reasons. First, the commercial, fiscal, and military developments that occurred after 1688 generated an increased demand for the kinds of information for which periodicals were

ideally suited: regular updates on prices, market conditions, and political circumstances affecting trade.²⁸ The business press grew and diversified: merchants could now subscribe not only to price currents and stock exchange currents but also to marine lists, which provided information about the arrival and departure of ships in various ports. The public also had access to periodicals containing practical information about agriculture and industry, such as John Houghton's *Collection for Improvement of Husbandry and Trade* (1692–1703). Secondly, after 1688, Whigs in Parliament began to associate licensing with arbitrary rule and monopoly, making it more difficult to defend the Licensing Act when it came up for renewal. Most arguments against pre-publication censorship in the late seventeenth century centered on religious toleration (the idea that freedom of conscience should extend to freedom of expression about religious views), but as party politics developed it became clear that censorship could become a political weapon wielded by the party in power. Meanwhile, the trade restrictions contained in the Licensing Act also came under increased scrutiny. The act limited printing and bookselling to London and to members of the Stationers' Company, a handful of whom claimed a perpetual property right in the most profitable books. When the act came up for renewal in 1693, several printers and booksellers complained to the House of Commons about this disparity within the trade, insisting that licensing enabled a few stationers to monopolize certain categories of works under the pretext of preventing "seditious" publications. Parliament ultimately renewed the Licensing Act, but only for one year and to the end of the next session. By the time the act came up for renewal again in 1695, the philosopher John Locke had prepared a written critique of licensing that highlighted the dangers of both ecclesiastical censorship and trade monopolies, and the MP Edward

Clarke used Locke's remarks to campaign against renewal of the existing act. In March 1695 and again in November 1695 Clarke sponsored bills that would have reduced the power of the Stationers' Company and either eliminated licensing or diluted it, but neither of these bills made it out of committee before the end of the session. The result was that the Licensing Act lapsed and no new regulations replaced it.²⁹

The Production and Distribution of News after 1695

In retrospect, the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 created a major opening for newspapers, though at the time it was not clear that licensing had ended for good. The Stationers' Company repeatedly petitioned Parliament for some form of press regulation. Because licensing had combined authorization to print and sell a particular work with the exclusive right to do so, the lapse of licensing led printers and booksellers to complain about the spread of "piracy." The term piracy had been used to describe violations of trade customs (such as printing a work registered by another stationer) as early as the mid-seventeenth century, but it became much more common in the years after 1695.³⁰ Among MPs, meanwhile, the proliferation of newspapers raised the question of whether or not they should be licensed. In 1696, the House of Commons briefly considered a "Bill to prevent the Writing, Printing, and Publishing any News without License."³¹ Yet no such law was passed, and from this point on no monarch asserted a prerogative power over news; such a move would have smacked of arbitrary rule at a time when Parliament was debating how best to regulate printing. Most members of the trade assumed that some form of licensing would be reinstated, and numerous bills were proposed in the ten years after 1695. But licensing had become too controversial to obtain a majority in Parliament,

and government now turned to the common law of seditious libel as a way of exercising censorship after publication rather than before. Seditious libel was understood to include any public statement tending to encourage contempt or ridicule of the government (church and state) or its officials.³²

The end of licensing therefore did not immediately lead to newspapers that were highly critical of the monarch, ministers, or MPs. The newspapers that appeared after 1695 did not avoid domestic politics entirely, but they were more cautious than those of 1641–2 or 1679–80. Three of them—the *Flying-Post*, which became increasingly Whig, the *Post-Boy*, which was associated with the Tories, and the *Post-Man*, which focused on foreign news—appeared three times a week until the early 1730s. The reference to the “post” in all of these titles made clear that newspapers depended on regular mail delivery (now three times a week to and from London) to obtain news and distribute it to customers. Focusing on short bulletins of news and avoiding political commentary, they resembled the early corantos much more than the newsbooks of the Civil War era.³³ Although the tone of the tri-weekly newspapers reflected party politics, they were not free to print parliamentary proceedings. The Lords and Commons considered it a breach of privilege to publish the debates or identify individual members by name and they insisted on this privilege until the 1770s (see next section). But accounts of Parliament did leak out in subscription newsletters, whose writers paid clerks for minutes of proceedings, obtained snippets of news from those who had attended debates, and collected gossip in coffeehouses. Unlike their counterparts in the 1660s and 1670s, these writers did not work directly for the secretaries of state, and so they had to find a balance between serving their elite customers and avoiding trouble with Parliament. John Dyer,

who circulated a written newsletter three times a week from at least 1688 until his death in 1713, was arrested several times and brought before the Commons and Lords.

Although Parliament watched Dyer closely, they never punished him severely. The longevity of his and other newsletters reveals that elite readers in the early eighteenth century sought out news from a range of manuscript and printed sources.³⁴

The early eighteenth century marked a transition period in attitudes toward censorship. The government prosecuted a number of writers and printers for seditious libel, but some political leaders also began to see the benefits of counteracting criticism by commissioning writers to defend their policies. Robert Harley, an influential minister under Queen Anne (reigned 1702–14), mobilized the talents of Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift, and others.³⁵ Robert Walpole expanded this practice after he became de facto Prime Minister in 1721. By the 1720s, the official *London Gazette* was no match for papers like the *London Journal* (1720–34) or the *Craftsman* (1726–52), which had the active support of opposition leaders. Walpole therefore purchased the *London Journal*, set up new papers to defend his policies, and arranged for copies to be sent postage-free to provincial readers. Meanwhile, the ministry employed an agent to monitor newspapers and pamphlets for seditious material. Printers and press workers were just as vulnerable as writers. For example, during the prosecution of the outspoken Jacobite printer-writer Nathaniel Mist in 1728, several members of his staff were punished, from the compositor who set the type to the woman who sold the paper in the streets.³⁶

Printers in England's North American colonies had to worry about the common law of seditious libel, but they also faced royal governors, councils, and assemblies that at various points asserted control over what could be printed.³⁷ The government of

Massachusetts shut down Benjamin Harris's *Public Occurrences* after one issue in 1690 because he took liberties reporting both local and international affairs. Still, Harris had only envisioned a monthly publication: local news spread by word of mouth, news from England rarely arrived more than once a month, and Boston was not yet connected by post to other colonial cities, making it nearly impossible to collect enough news for weekly publication.³⁸

The expansion of the post, combined with the end of licensing in 1695, enabled the growth of newspapers in the English provinces and in North America. The Licensing Act had restricted printing to London; within ten years of its lapse there were weekly newspapers in Bristol, Norwich, Exeter, and Boston, Massachusetts.³⁹ Whereas in English towns printers started newspapers, in Boston postmasters ran the first successful titles. In 1704, the Boston postmaster John Campbell hired the printer Bartholomew Green to produce the *Boston News-Letter* (1704–76, with interruptions), which was an outgrowth of a manuscript newsletter started by his father. As postmaster, Campbell could send and receive letters free of postage (known as a franking privilege), and for fifteen years he used this advantage to gather intelligence and distribute his newspaper to customers. The government did not fund Campbell's paper directly, though it was licensed by the office of the royal governor, which occasionally relied on it to publish official texts. The Postmaster General in London replaced Campbell in 1718, and his successor started the *Boston Gazette* (1719–98), again hiring a printer to do the work. The third Boston paper—the *New-England Courant* (1721–6)—did not enjoy postal privileges. Unlike other publications, it featured prose and verse contributions by a group of local writers, including essays that were critical of clergymen and the colonial

government. The authorities responded by sending its printer James Franklin to prison and prohibiting him from continuing the paper (although it continued for a while under James's brother Benjamin Franklin).⁴⁰

Most colonial printers chose to exercise some self-censorship to avoid such trouble with the authorities, not least because they wanted government printing contracts. Indeed, newspapers tended to be part of a larger printing and retailing business. Setting up a printing shop required an investment of a little more than £100 in equipment; presses and type had to be imported from England or purchased or inherited from an existing printer. A successful printing shop combined job printing (any work done for a paying customer), government contracts (for printing laws, notices, currency, etc.), and a newspaper sold by annual subscription.⁴¹ When it came to selling news, printers found that subscription-based periodicals had several advantages over separate publications: a steady weekly production schedule, dedicated customers in known locations, and a regular flow of income from advertisements and subscriptions, although money remained difficult to collect. Between 1700 and 1765, three quarters of colonial printers had a newspaper at one time or another. Of the sixty titles launched during that time, ten lasted less than two years, ten lasted between two and four years, and ten lasted between five and nine years; nineteen of the papers lasted twenty years or more, suggesting that the subscription newspaper had become an important component of a successful printing business.⁴²

Printing shops in colonial America were family businesses in which wives and daughters worked alongside nephews and cousins. Some women took charge of printing shops after their husbands' deaths. Elizabeth Timothy of Charleston, for example, managed the business (including the newspaper) from 1738 to 1746, when she passed it

on to her son. In Williamsburg, Clementina Rind inherited her husband's shop in 1773 and edited the *Virginia Gazette* until her own death in 1774. About twenty-five women ran printing shops in America before 1820. The family nature of printing businesses in the eighteenth century meant that women often played a greater role in the production and distribution of news than they would in later periods.⁴³

In Britain there was no licensing after 1695, but successive governments used taxation to discourage the circulation of the cheapest newspapers (which they associated with more radical ideas) and to raise revenue.⁴⁴ The first Stamp Act went into effect in 1712; newspapers printed on a half sheet of paper had to pay a halfpenny tax per copy, and those printed on a whole sheet had to pay a full penny per copy. The logistics were especially difficult for printers in the provinces, because stamped sheets had to be purchased from London in advance of printing, and several papers went out of business in 1712.⁴⁵ But printers in London and the provinces quickly found ways to adapt. They noticed that the act did not clearly define “newspaper” and contained no provision for those printed on more than a full sheet of paper. Many printers expanded their publications to 1½ sheets, which they folded so as to create six-page newspapers selling for 1½ *d.* per copy. This tactic enabled them to pay the much lower duty for pamphlets—2*s.* per edition regardless of the number of copies. Other printers evaded the tax entirely, and by the 1720s a range of illegal unstamped publications were being hawked on the streets of London for as little as half a penny. To eliminate the unstamped papers, the government went after the hawkers and street vendors. A 1743 law specified fines and imprisonment for anyone selling unstamped papers, and vigorous enforcement put such papers out of business almost immediately.⁴⁶

The loophole allowing newspapers of more than one sheet to register as pamphlets was closed in 1725, and most of the weeklies scaled back from six pages to four and raised their prices from $1\frac{1}{2}d.$ to $2d.$ Because space was now more limited, some printers experimented with reducing the size of type and increasing the number of columns from two to three. During the 1730s and 1740s, many newspapers expanded the size of their sheets so as to squeeze more news and advertisements into each issue without paying more tax.⁴⁷ The stamp tax was raised again in 1757 (to finance the Seven Years' War), increasing the average price of a newspaper to $2\frac{1}{2}d.$ That price represented about 5 percent of a London laborer's weekly wages and 10 percent of an agricultural worker's weekly wages. In 1776 the tax rose again (to finance the American War), leading most papers to raise their prices to $3d.$ ⁴⁸

Newspapers complained about the duties, but they were largely able to pass the cost on to their elite customers. The decline in total sales after 1712 did not last long, and the tax increases of 1757 and 1776 did not cause significant drops in circulation. But the success of unstamped papers between 1712 and 1743 (when they were suppressed) suggests that newspapers could have reached a wider public if they had not been taxed. In fact, the circulation of individual titles did not increase dramatically during this period. Around 1720 the London dailies probably sold 800 copies each, the tri-weeklies 2500, and the weeklies 3500. By 1775, the morning dailies and evening tri-weeklies dominated with between 2000 and 5000 copies each.⁴⁹ Proprietors attempted to appeal to a broader range of customers—female readers, country readers, the beau monde—but before 1776 newspapers depended primarily on a public of merchants, artisans, and shopkeepers earning at least £50 per year.⁵⁰

The laws requiring newspaper stamps also imposed duties on advertisements, but this did not stop ads from transforming the business of news during the eighteenth century. The corantos of the 1620s and 1630s did not contain paid ads, nor did the newsbooks of the 1640s. L'Estrange's official publications in the early 1660s averaged about seven ads per issue. The *London Gazette* originally had a policy against advertisements, which were "not properly the business of a Paper of Intelligence." Over time the *Gazette* came to include paid notices, but during the 1670s, 1680s, and 1690s there were also periodicals entirely devoted to ads and distributed free of charge. One of these, *The City Mercury: Or, Advertisements concerning Trade* (1675–78?) was published with the authorization (and perhaps the financial involvement) of L'Estrange, who had received a monopoly on advertisements back in 1663. The lapse of licensing in 1695 ended restrictions on who could operate a press as well as who could print advertisements. After 1695 free advertising periodicals in the vein of *The City Mercury* were apparently unable to compete with the tri-weekly and daily newspapers that also contained ads.⁵¹

The space devoted to advertisements in eighteenth-century English and American newspapers represented a major cultural and economic change. The first daily newspaper, the *Daily Courant* (1702–35), devoted about one half (and sometimes up to two thirds) of its space to advertisements. In the *Daily Post* (1719–46) and the *Daily Advertiser* (1731–98) advertisements took up as much as three quarters of the space, including most of the first page.⁵² The success of provincial papers like the *Newcastle Courant* (1711–69) also depended upon their ability to attract advertisers.⁵³ In colonial America at least a full page (and often two) were devoted to ads for goods and services. A study of the

Pennsylvania Gazette from 1728 to 1765 revealed that about 45 percent of available printing space was devoted to ads.⁵⁴ In most cases ads were submitted directly to the printer by local merchants, shopkeepers, and other individuals selling property, looking for workers, or offering rewards for runaway slaves and servants.⁵⁵

To what extent did ads pay for eighteenth-century newspapers? Financial records from the period are extremely rare, but surviving evidence reveals the basic pattern. For the first eight months of 1707 the *London Gazette* took in £1,135 from sales and £790 (41 percent) from advertisements. The *Gazette* was published less frequently and had fewer advertisements than other London papers, but it charged much more (10s. per notice as opposed to 2s. or 2s. 6d.) and its wide distribution made it the preferred place for announcing auctions, real estate, and lost or stolen goods. Over time the *Gazette* lost ground to the daily and tri-weekly “advertisers” whose titles reflected the importance of ads in attracting readers. In 1775, the *Public Advertiser* raised £560 from sales and £388 (41 percent) from advertisements.⁵⁶ The accounts for the *Pennsylvania Gazette* during the period that Benjamin Franklin and David Hall were joint owners (1748–66) reveal a higher proportion of sales receipts (£750 per year on average) to advertising income (£200 per year on average). The *Pennsylvania Gazette* had a much higher circulation than most colonial papers—as many as 2500 a year compared to an average of 700 or 800—so sales may have comprised a greater proportion of revenue than it did for other papers, but it is important to remember that Franklin and Hall also made money printing ads separate from the newspaper (i.e. handbills or broadsides paid for by local businesses).⁵⁷ James Parker, who claimed to have 700 subscribers to his *New York Gazette* in 1769, referred to advertisements as “the Life of a Paper.” He also reported that 25 percent of his

subscribers never paid their bills, making cash payments for ads all the more important.⁵⁸

A detailed study of the *Salisbury Journal* and the *Hampshire Chronicle* showed how newspaper proprietors in English towns also saw advertisements as the main source of profits.⁵⁹

The boundary between news and advertisements was not always clear. Office copies of the *Daily Advertiser* from 1744 (on which an employee recorded the rate charged for each notice) show that “puffs” promoting a product or event were charged the same rate as ads but evaded the tax on advertisements because they were disguised as news.⁶⁰ Some newspapers also agreed to print reports for individuals in exchange for payment. When a reader complained about a poorly written obituary in 1765, the editor of the *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (1764–96) replied, “that paragraph was inserted and *paid for* by a friend of the deceased; and we are no more accountable for the diction thereof, than for any other paragraph or advertisement which people pay to have inserted.”⁶¹

Meanwhile, not all genuine ads were paid for because the financial partners in newspapers often reserved the right to insert notices.⁶² In fact, one of the main attractions for the London booksellers, theater managers, and auction houses that invested in newspapers was that they provided an advertising channel for their other products. By the 1720s, group ownership was common for London newspapers, and booksellers tended to dominate the lists of shareholders.⁶³ This fact helps to explain the preponderance of ads for books, but books were also, along with medicines, the first nationally distributed products. The consortia model of newspaper ownership satisfied three aims: it distributed the financial risk of publication among several partners, created a new sideline revenue stream (in the form of dividends), and enabled booksellers, theater managers, and others

to promote their primary products, which were often time-sensitive (a new edition of a book, a play held over for another night, an auction, etc.). In English towns outside of London, group ownership also became more common after the mid-century, but most provincial newspapers remained part of a family business that also included job printing and retail sales of books, stationary, medicine, and household goods.⁶⁴

In terms of distribution, London newspapers increasingly relied on wholesalers, especially the so-called “mercury women,” who bought pamphlets and periodicals in bulk, sold some out of their shops and distributed the rest to hawkers (many of whom were also women). Elizabeth Nutt, a widow and mother of printers, oversaw several shops with the assistance of her daughters, and was one of the leading distributors of newspapers in London during the first half of the eighteenth century. Another mercury woman named Anne Dodd also distributed large quantities of pamphlets and newspapers. In 1731, for example, she handled 2700 out of 10,000 total copies of the *London Journal*. Compared to later periods, when the production and distribution of newspapers became overwhelmingly masculine, in the early to mid eighteenth century women remained crucial to the dissemination of news.⁶⁵

Improvements in transportation during the eighteenth century facilitated the growth of the newspaper press in London and the provinces. The turnpike network expanded, road conditions improved, and horse and wagon carrier services became cheaper and faster. Many newspaper publishers set up their own distribution networks. The provincial papers in particular relied on booksellers, grocers, schoolmasters, and others to manage delivery. These agents collected payment from subscribers, took in advertisements (for which they received a commission) and supervised delivery by newsmen (for

subscribers) and hawkers (for casual buyers). The newsmen sold a range of goods offered by the newspaper proprietor and his agents (books, stationary, medicine, etc.), and the sale of these ancillary products helped ensure delivery of newspapers in more remote areas. If the newsmen had carried only newspapers, they may not have found it worthwhile to visit far-flung customers. Newspaper owners benefited from having dedicated newsmen who made regular contact with their customers; meanwhile, the purveyors of goods and services (such as medicines and insurance) exploited these sales networks and paid to insert ads in the newspapers.⁶⁶

London newspapers relied on the royal post to a much greater extent than their provincial counterparts. To reduce costs, London publishers made deals with postal officials known as Clerks of the Road. In exchange for a fee, the clerks used their franking privileges to send newspapers from London to local postmasters around the country. The postmasters paid the clerks *2d.* per copy, which they passed on to subscribers. The use of franks therefore benefited the customer (who paid less than if regular postage were charged) and the postal officials (who collected fees, effectively acting as wholesalers). Some postal officials also became shareholders in newspapers, and contemporaries accused them of favoring the distribution of certain titles. Because they were government officials, they also felt pressure to impede newspapers that criticized the administration and favor those that praised it (this clearly happened during the age of Walpole).⁶⁷ Members of Parliament also had franking privileges, which they used to send newspapers postage-free to friends and constituents. In an effort to prevent people from forging an MP's signature on newspapers, a 1764 Act allowed MPs to send orders to the Post Office specifying which newspapers they wished to frank. Certain

members of the parliamentary opposition exploited this measure to frank large quantities of newspapers on behalf of printers. In the early 1760s, newspapers franked by MPs had made up about 25 percent of those traveling through the mail. By 1782, the proportion was 60 percent.⁶⁸ The widespread franking of newspapers had not been intended by Parliament, but it clearly enabled readers throughout the country to obtain newspapers at a significantly reduced cost (postage would have added 2–3*d.* to the cost of each newspaper).⁶⁹

Newspaper distribution worked differently in the American colonies for two reasons. First, newspapers were not affected by stamp and advertising duties, with the exception of a brief period during the Seven Years' War, when Massachusetts and New York temporarily imposed a halfpenny tax on newspapers to raise revenue.⁷⁰ Second, the royal post was far less developed in America. Many printers served as local postmasters, but in towns where there was more than one printer, only one of them could be postmaster, and he had a major advantage in terms of obtaining intelligence and ensuring delivery to his own subscribers. There was no uniform rate for sending newspapers through the post, and printers could not always rely on the horse riders to deliver in a timely manner. Riders had limited capacity and would refuse to carry newspapers when they became too burdensome. Moreover, the royal post mainly connected the towns along the coast and only went as far south as Virginia. For all of these reasons, printers (especially those who were not postmasters) often hired their own newsboys (for local delivery) and riders (for more distant subscribers). These ad hoc distribution channels were crucial to newspaper owners throughout the colonial period.⁷¹

Dailies, Weeklies, and Monthlies: Business Practice and Journalistic Culture

Writers, printers, and booksellers experimented with a number of different forms of publication during the early eighteenth century.⁷² While editing the official *London Gazette*, Richard Steele launched a tri-weekly publication called the *Tatler* (1709–10). The *Tatler* followed the form of the *Gazette* (two columns of text printed on both sides of a single sheet), but in addition to news and advertisements it contained longer essays on social and literary topics, most of which were written by Steele and Joseph Addison.⁷³ Steele and Addison also collaborated on *The Spectator* (daily, 1711–12), which combined reader correspondence with essays on cultural and economic issues of the day, and was reprinted numerous times in book form during the eighteenth century. Other essay-based periodicals in the 1710s were more overtly political, such as Jonathan Swift's *The Examiner* (1710–14). All of these periodicals depended upon the talents of particular writers, many of whom benefited from patronage. Addison and Steele had various government appointments and Swift was Dean of St. Patrick's. Robert Harley paid Defoe to write the *Review of the Affairs of France* (1704–13), which largely supported Harley's own policies.⁷⁴

Alongside newspapers and essay periodicals, writers and printers experimented with monthly digests of recent events. Abel Boyer's *Present State of Europe* (1690–1738) compiled reports of foreign affairs and parliamentary proceedings, which remained illegal. Although Boyer was arrested and fined in 1711, he continued to provide occasional accounts of Parliament on and off until his death in 1729. Like Dyer's

newsletters, Boyer's monthly periodical tested the limits of acceptable publicity; the former had a restricted circulation and the latter printed debates that were already at least a few weeks old, which may help to explain why these publications were tolerated as much as they were. Boyer provided a model for Edward Cave's *Gentleman's Magazine* (1731–1907), which contained a mix of politics, literature, science, and news, and was the first monthly periodical to use the name “magazine.” Cave and his imitators at the *London Magazine* (1732–85) exercised caution in their coverage of Parliament by omitting the names of speakers or veiling them in clever ways. Samuel Johnson, who wrote some of the accounts in the *Gentleman's*, explained that Cave had influence with doorkeepers that enabled his agents to enter the debates or linger in the hallways to gather details. Some MPs also furnished notes or complete speeches, a practice that became more widespread later in the century. In 1738, the House of Commons resolved that it was a breach of privilege to publish accounts of Parliament in any form. The magazines responded by framing accounts as proceedings of a political club or the legislature of an imaginary country, but even these accounts led to fines and reprimands by both Houses of Parliament. By the late 1750s the magazines had discontinued their coverage. Full and regular accounts of Parliament had to await the newspapers of the early 1770s (as will be discussed later).⁷⁵

By the 1730s, the essay-based periodicals that had thrived in the 1710s and 1720s could not match the range of material now available in the monthly magazines or the freshness of news in the daily and tri-weekly newspapers.⁷⁶ Over the course of the 1740s, 1750s, and 1760s, the newspapers backed by booksellers diversified, adding original essays, letters to the printer, and excerpts from books to the traditional mix of news

paragraphs and advertisements. By the 1760s, papers like the *London Evening Post* (1727–1806), *Public Advertiser* (1752–94), *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (1764–96), and *Morning Chronicle* (1769–1865) dominated English journalism. Inspired in part by the magazines, they gathered into one place a range of material that had previously appeared in distinct publications: news reports, political essays, literary criticism, poetry, price lists, and advertisements. In these publications, the primary unit of news was the paragraph rather than the article. Newspaper columns often contained paragraphs on several topics printed one after the other, without headlines or other marks (besides paragraph breaks) to differentiate one report from another. From the printer’s perspective, one advantage of treating the paragraph as the basic nugget of news was that it was relatively easy for printers to select and arrange paragraphs of varying lengths so as to fill a given column with print. Printers scanned other publications looking for paragraphs worth copying, which they combined with any material submitted by merchants, politicians, and interested readers. In addition to letters and essays, readers could submit a single paragraph to the newspapers, some of which set up mailboxes to receive anonymous submissions after hours.⁷⁷ Most of the work of selecting and editing material for publication took place in the printing shop, but increasingly this task was given to a separate individual who became known as the “editor.” Roger Thompson, who was managing three papers in 1769—the *Gazetteer*, the *General Evening Post*, and the *Craftsman*—may have been the first to hold that title.⁷⁸

For foreign news, London newspapers relied extensively on French and Dutch gazettes as well as the *London Gazette*, whose existing translations could be copied with no expense or risk. Papers in other English towns and in the colonies relied in turn on the

London press, so that much of the European news read by people in North America or the English provinces had been filtered through London. Newspapers rarely acknowledged their sources. Many claimed to have (unpaid) correspondents abroad, and some certainly did.⁷⁹

In terms of newsgathering, the most important development during the eighteenth century involved “ship news.” Captains and crew who had learned of events during their voyage shared news and rumors with customs officials, insurance brokers, and merchants, who in turn sent them to newspapers. The same ships that brought official government dispatches brought private letters and newspapers, and in the days following a ship’s arrival printers struggled to make sense of contradictory reports. The main clearing-house for ship news was Lloyd’s coffeehouse in London, home to the Lloyd’s association of insurance underwriters. Agents for underwriters greeted ships in each port, noting their port of origin, cargo, and any news relayed by the captain. The underwriters then shared these reports with the master of Lloyd’s coffee shop, who recorded each day’s news into a large folio volume for immediate consultation by members. The master used the same reports to prepare extracts for publication in *Lloyd’s List* (1692 [ms]–present [online]) and *Lloyd’s Evening Post* (1757–1805), which other newspapers copied in turn. In an age when most news appeared anonymously, the ship captain’s report was a rare example of eyewitness testimony attributed to a named individual.⁸⁰

In colonial seaports, printers who hoped for oral reports from ship captains and the latest newspapers and magazines from London eagerly awaited the arrival of transatlantic ships. The transatlantic voyage could take three months or more, depending on the route and weather conditions. During the winter, few if any ships arrived, which meant a

deluge of news in the spring.⁸¹ In the case of important news (such as treaties or Acts of Parliament affecting the colonies), printers sometimes issued broadsides rather than wait for the next issue of their weekly newspapers. Most local news circulated orally or through private letters, but major storms and the last words of executed criminals appeared in small pamphlets or broadsides.⁸² The newspapers contained local material in the form of advertisements and occasional reader submissions, but most of the news was copied from newspapers that arrived by ship or post. A few examples of efforts to gather and analyze information of public concern (such as an epidemic) can be found, but these did not appear in newspapers. Instead, such reporting depended upon the initiatives of individual writers, ministers, or civic leaders who gathered information (sometimes using questionnaires) and published it in books or specialized periodicals at their own risk.⁸³

Newspapers in the American colonies and the English provinces were managed very differently from their London counterparts. In London, shareholders expected revenue from dividends and a vehicle for advertising their own products or services. Most shareholders were only concerned with the editorial side in so far as it put them at risk for an expensive prosecution for seditious libel.⁸⁴ Some booksellers had shares in more than one paper, and some printers were responsible for several papers at once, which further facilitated the reprinting of articles among dailies, tri-weeklies, and weeklies.⁸⁵ The political convictions of individual shareholders could not always determine the choices made by the printers and editors managing their papers. In the provinces and in the colonies, a single individual (with the help of family members) often had to solicit advertisers and readers, collect payment from them, compile reports from other newspapers and the occasional submission, and supervise production. He or she had more

direct control over insertions, and more reason to worry about offending local readers, advertisers, and officials. Reliance on income from government led to some self-censorship, but such income was rarely enough to buy the loyalty of a printer, who needed printing jobs and advertisements from a range of sources to remain profitable.⁸⁶ Benjamin Franklin claimed his *Pennsylvania Gazette* was open to all parties, and from the 1730s he publicly defended the idea that “when Truth has fair Play, it will always prevail over Falsehood.”⁸⁷ But when presented with a text that might cause controversy or harm his business, Franklin would refuse to insert it in the *Gazette* and propose that the author pay for a separate pamphlet to be distributed without Franklin’s name on it. The profitability of Franklin’s business depended in part on prudent decisions about what to *exclude* from the newspaper.⁸⁸

Colonial newspapers were not entirely free to report on the activities of royal governors or provincial assemblies because most printers sought government contracts and wished to avoid prosecutions for seditious libel. John Peter Zenger’s *New York Weekly Journal* (1733–51) was exceptional because it was financed by a political faction that supported the former Chief Justice of New York, Lewis Morris, in his battle with the governor, William Cosby. The *Weekly Journal* attacked Cosby as tyrannical and argued for the role of a free press in reforming a corrupt government. When the governor sued Zenger for libel in 1735, Zenger’s lawyer insisted newspapers should be free to monitor and criticize local officials whose distance from the royal court enabled them to get away with corruption. Legal precedents made clear that in libel cases truth was irrelevant, and the role of the jury was supposed to be limited to deciding whether or not the defendant had published the text. Still, the jury was persuaded by the arguments of Zenger’s lawyer

and blocked the conviction. The Zenger trial revealed officials could not always count on a jury to side with them, but it did not lead to any change in the law. Attitudes toward freedom of the press remained ambiguous in the eighteenth century. Almost no one argued for pre-publication censorship, but few celebrated the idea of a totally unrestrained press.⁸⁹

Although colonial newspapers continued to copy news from London, during the 1740s and 1750s they began to contain more reports from other cities in North America, including discussions of crime, disease, religion, the role of women, and the danger of slave revolts and Indian raids.⁹⁰ After 1760, the increase in the number of printers in the larger towns (Boston, New York, and Philadelphia) and conflict with Britain led to more differentiation of newspapers along political lines, with printer-editors taking more outspoken positions to attract readers.⁹¹ But the main turning point came with the Stamp Act of 1765, not to be confused with the stamp duty on newspapers still operating in Britain. The 1765 Act was part of a series of measures by which the crown sought to get the American colonists to help pay Britain's debt after the Seven Years' War. Although it imposed duties on a range of paper items from playing cards to legal documents, it promised to be especially burdensome for newspaper printers, who feared that they would not be able to pass the cost of the stamp on to their customers. Opposition to the Act politicized the press, and while some printers still avoided controversy, most felt pressure to choose sides. By the outbreak of war in 1775, it became nearly impossible for printers to remain neutral. The use of verbal and physical violence against printers who did not support independence revealed that liberty of the press now meant something different from lack of prior restraint: rather than being open to all sides, radical leaders

expected printers to advance the cause of “liberty” and they went after those who did not.⁹²

Between 1763 and 1776, the number of newspapers in the English colonies doubled from twenty-one to forty-two, but this growth did not eliminate political pamphlets, which also surged during this period. Pamphlets enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with newspapers: many of them began as essays in newspapers, and others enjoyed a much wider circulation thanks to excerpts or full reprints in the newspapers.⁹³ Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* (1776) was the most influential pamphlet of the age, but its influence depended in large part on the way it was reprinted and commented on in newspapers.⁹⁴ Newspapers also featured a new genre—the exposé—which drew heavily on pamphlet culture by revealing facts that tarnished an individual’s reputation or rallied readers behind a cause.⁹⁵

In London, extensive coverage of parliamentary debates in the 1770s further reinforced the newspaper’s importance as a venue for public opinion. Magazines again took the first step by publishing tentative accounts early in 1770, and by the end of that year several daily and tri-weekly newspapers were also printing the debates. In February 1771, the House of Commons summoned the printers or editors of eight papers for violating standing orders against publication. While some MPs argued that accounts should be prohibited because they tended to misrepresent speeches, others argued that the public had a right to be informed. Some took a middle course, suggesting that newspapers be allowed to print accounts, but only after the session had ended. The radical leader John Wilkes used his position as Alderman of London to mobilize constables and magistrates to help three of the printers resist arrest and publicly challenge the authority of the House

of Commons. Once it became clear that Wilkes had the upper hand, the Commons dropped the charges, giving the newspapers tacit permission to print debates. After a similar struggle with Wilkes in 1774, the Lords also abandoned their long-held privilege.⁹⁶

It took several years for newspapers to develop full and regular accounts, but by the outbreak of the American Revolution, parliamentary debates took up a significant amount of space in most London newspapers. Not all papers produced original versions; several simply copied the accounts provided by other newspapers.⁹⁷ In addition, the Houses of Parliament still reserved the right to exclude “strangers,” the term used for non-members who observed from the “Strangers’ Gallery.” Even when reporters were admitted, they were not guaranteed a seat or officially permitted to take notes until some time in the 1780s.⁹⁸ There is some evidence that shorthand was used, but no reporter in the 1770s claimed to be providing a verbatim transcript. William Woodfall, a highly respected writer for the *Morning Chronicle*, described his typical account as “a mere skeleton of the arguments urged upon the occasion” and warned readers not to expect “the exact phraseology used by the speakers.”⁹⁹

Investments in direct newsgathering remained limited. A few newspapers had editors who received a salary from the shareholders or were given an ownership stake in exchange for their efforts, but most relied on material copied from other newspapers or unpaid contributions by merchants, politicians, and other well-connected readers.¹⁰⁰ Apart from any salary paid to an editor, the money spent acquiring news went to subscriptions and postage to obtain newspapers printed in other cities and countries. The cost of procuring foreign gazettes and paying translators led many papers to rely on the

reports found in other papers, especially the *London Gazette*.¹⁰¹ The lack of copyright for news paragraphs and essays appearing in periodicals, and the low incidence of payment for original submissions clearly reduced the cost of obtaining “copy.”¹⁰² Outlays for stamp and advertising duties, printing, and paper dwarfed those associated with collecting and editing the news throughout this period.¹⁰³ Indeed, the high cost of production and government taxation during this period was offset by the negligible amount spent on reporting.

Conclusion

On the eve of the Glorious Revolution there was one official newspaper printed in London and none in the English provinces or North American colonies. By the outbreak of the American Revolution there were twenty-one newspapers in London, about forty-two in the American colonies, and approximately fifty in English towns outside London.¹⁰⁴ These papers were no longer subject to pre-publication censorship but they remained vulnerable to prosecution for seditious libel. Despite Zenger’s victory there was no change in the law during this period and most newspaper owners sought to avoid a prosecution. Yet there was an important advance in the freedom to publish parliamentary debates, whose regular inclusion after 1770 marked a shift in newspapers’ focus on foreign affairs toward more coverage of national (and imperial) politics. Pamphlets continued to be important forums for debate and often had a symbiotic relationship with newspapers. Broad­sides were still used to provide late-breaking news, but by 1775 newspapers had become the primary means of commercializing news. Periodicity proved

crucial for attracting readers and advertisers, and sale by subscription enabled publishers to know approximately how many copies to print and where to send them.

The fact that news periodicals flourished in England despite the duties on newspapers and advertisements confirms that their owners developed effective strategies for attracting readers and advertisers among the merchant and political elite. Government appointments and political subsidies helped finance some newspapers and essay-based periodicals during the early eighteenth century, but in the middle decades of the century the “advertisers” and “evening posts” came to dominate the trade. Most of these publications were owned and controlled by shareholders who counted on regular dividend payments and remained largely independent of political pressure.¹⁰⁵ In the English provinces and the American colonies, most newspapers were part of a printing and retail business run by a family or a small partnership. They also depended on a combination of subscription and advertising revenue to be successful. Apart from a few writers covering Parliament, there were no reporters. Newspapers depended on a shared custom of copying, which kept newsgathering costs low and ensured that news could spread from one place to another. In the colonies, printers who served as postmasters exploited this advantage to collect and distribute news, but like their rivals who were not postmasters, they also had to build business relationships and distribution networks to ensure the success of their newspapers. In England proprietors made deals with the Clerks of the Road, postmasters, and MPs to take advantage of their franking privileges.

The custom of copying and the exploitation of postal privileges made economic sense for the owners and printers of newspapers, but they also had important political consequences. When the press on both sides of the Atlantic became more politicized in

the 1760s and 1770s, writers exploited the fact that newspapers copied from each other to disseminate their messages to a wider audience.¹⁰⁶ While some planted stories or mislabeled sources in an attempt to advance political or financial goals, others cherished the ability to assume a depersonalized voice in debates about culture, society, and government.¹⁰⁷ The fact that so many paragraphs and essays were copied or submitted by unpaid correspondents needs to be understood in light of the culture and business of journalism at the time. The active participation of readers and the freedom with which printers and editors republished existing articles were part of what made the growth of the newspaper press possible in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.

Abstract
This chapter charts changes in the business of news in England and its North American colonies from the early seventeenth century through 1775. Contending that the “rise of the newspaper” was not inevitable, it discusses a variety of news publications, from handwritten newsletters and broadside ballads to printed newspapers and magazines. The chapter explains how writers, editors, and printers of news adapted to changes in postal distribution and press regulations—including censorship and taxation. By locating editorial conventions and business strategies in their historical context, it reveals how the newspaper became the primary medium for packaging and distributing news during the eighteenth century.
Keywords
newsletters, newspapers, pamphlets, magazines, censorship, press regulations, postal distribution, England, colonial America

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