The Paragraph as Information Technology: How News Traveled in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World
Will Slauter

To cite this version:

HAL Id: hal-01446908
https://hal.science/hal-01446908
Submitted on 26 Jan 2017

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire HAL, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.
The Paragraph as Information Technology
How News Traveled in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World

Will Slauter

In the eighteenth century, gazettes and newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic borrowed from each other: newspapers published in Boston picked up news from London, Paris, and Amsterdam; gazettes printed in Florence republished excerpts from Vienna, Madrid, and Philadelphia. However, the basic unit of news during this period was not, as in twentieth and twenty-first century newspapers, the article but the paragraph. Compared to other forms of writing, the paragraph could be easily separated out from one publication and inserted into another. The ease with which a paragraph could be reproduced and migrate facilitated the transmission of news across a growing network of periodicals at the end of the eighteenth century.

The American political leader John Adams provided an inside account of this phenomenon. During his diplomatic mission to France during the American Revolutionary War, Adams had access to a dozen French-language gazettes (including those printed in the Netherlands, the Rhineland, and Avignon) as well as English-language newspapers from London and several American cities. Reading through these periodicals, Adams was struck by the similarity of their accounts, and, in 1783, he warned the president of the American Congress.

The gazettes of Europe still continue to be employed as the great engines of fraud and imposture to the good people of America. Stockjobbers are not the only people who employ a set of scribblers to invent and publish falsehoods for their own peculiar purposes. British

This article was translated from the French by Michele Greer, revised by Will Slauter, and edited by Angela Krieger and Stephen Sawyer.

and French, as well as other politicians, entertain these fabricators of paragraphs, who are stationed about in the various cities of Europe, and take up each other’s productions in such a manner that no sooner does a paragraph appear in a French, Dutch or English paper, but it is immediately seized on and reprinted in all the others; this is not all: in looking over the American newspapers, I observe that nothing is seized on with so much avidity by the American newellists [sic] for republication in their gazettes as these political lies. I cannot attribute this to the credulity of the printers, who have generally more discernment than to be deceived. But I verily believe there are persons in every State employed to select out these things and get them reprinted.  

Adams worried that unfounded reports gained credibility as paragraphs traveled from one publication to another, and he was not alone. The writer, spy, and adventurer Ange Goudar noted that the interdependence of gazettes gave readers the illusion of a consensus about current events. “The States of Europe all agree,” Goudar quipped. “Read the Gazette de Paris, the Postillion de Vienne, the Courrier d’Avignon, you will find the same lies repeated almost word for word.”  

False news, whether intentional or not, traveled quickly from one newspaper to another, and it was very difficult to stop its diffusion, as the London Craftsman remarked back in the 1730s. This problem had existed for a long time, but contemporaries noticed a new dimension with the appearance of the “paragraph writer” in the 1760s and 1770s. Readers became wary of this new type of hack writer, ready to sell his pen to defend political and financial interests. The Middlesex Journal of London mocked the paragraph writer for being half as expensive as an executioner but much more effective. Whereas an executioner charged 13 pence and a half per execution, “a paragraph writer shall kill you the stoutest man in the kingdom for his six-pence and bring him to life again for another.” A reader of the New York Daily Advertiser likewise observed that printers did not have time to write and were therefore duped by the “paragraphists.” 

These comments draw attention to a publishing phenomenon that was frequently noticed by contemporaries but remains little studied by historians: the rise of the paragraph as a genre of political writing and a vehicle for transmitting news. Far from being universal, the paragraph has a history that needs to be reconstructed in order to better understand how writing practices evolved in various fields, from

philosophy and law to fiction and journalism. It was only at the end of the seven-
teenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century that the division of
printed texts into paragraphs became widespread; many books in the sixteenth
and seventeenth centuries had few paragraph breaks or none at all. By contrast,
it is difficult to imagine the novels, philosophical treatises, and printed constitu-
tions of the eighteenth century without distinct paragraphs. The Age of Enlighten-
ment was also the first great age of the paragraph.

In the case of journalism, the diverse ways in which the paragraph was
employed (and contemporary attitudes toward these uses) reveal the specificity of
the eighteenth century compared to other periods in the history of the press. By the
early twentieth century newspaper articles were frequently composed of several
paragraphs, the first of which ideally summarized the most important facts. The
evolution of the journalistic paragraph over the course of the nineteenth century
has yet to be studied. More recently, the different uses of the paragraph online, with
“bloggers” replacing “paragraphists,” merit closer examination. In the eighteenth
century, newspapers and gazettes contained a wide range of texts, including official
documents, excerpts from books, political essays, parliamentary debates, letters to
the printer, poems, and advertisements. The paragraph, however, was the basic
unit of political and military news, and the division of periodicals into distinct
paragraphs facilitated the movement of news from one place to another.

The notion of the paragraph as a vehicle for news and a genre of writing in
itself makes it possible to re-examine a classic subject—the circulation of texts
in the revolutionary Atlantic World—by paying closer attention to contemporary
publishing practice. Such a study builds upon a rich historiography of eighteenth-
century journalism in Europe, Great Britain, and North America. Though specialists

7. On the history of the lead paragraph, see Michael Schudson, *The Power of News*
(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 59-64. For more general information, see
8. Without discussing the paragraph, the first studies of Franco-American exchanges
nonetheless demonstrated the importance of bibliographic analyses: Durand Echeverria,
*Mirage in the West: A History of the French Image of American Society to 1815* (Princeton:
Princeton University Press, 1957); Robert Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution:
A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800* (Princeton: Princeton University
Press, 1959-1965). For a more recent examination, see David Armitage, *The Declaration
9. For an overview, see Hannah Barker and Simon Burrows, eds., *Press, Politics and the
Public Sphere in Europe and North America, 1760-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University
the Eighteenth Century* (London: Croom Helm, 1987); Charles Clark, “Early American
Journalism: News and Opinion in the Popular Press,” in *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic
World*, eds. Hugh Amory and David D. Hall (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina
of the British Empire as a Matrix for the American Revolution,” *English Literary
have observed that gazettes and newspapers of that era contained mostly foreign news, the way that news traveled across linguistic and political borders remains little studied.\(^\text{10}\) By following the movement of paragraphs from one periodical to another, it is possible to reconstruct the trajectory of news. The ongoing digitization of eighteenth-century periodicals facilitates this task by making it much easier to visualize how a single paragraph appeared in different publications. In order to better understand the role of the paragraph in the production and distribution of news, however, it is useful to develop insights from two disciplines concerned with the transmission of knowledge and the construction of meaning: the history of science and the history of books.

Highlighting the social roots of science and the role of error in the construction of knowledge, several studies in the history of science have shown how ostensibly universal facts were produced in specific contexts.\(^\text{11}\) Once scholars revealed the social, economic, and cultural conditions of “facts,” they tried to understand, in Steven Shapin’s words, “how to interpret the relationship between the local settings in which scientific knowledge is produced and the unique efficiency with which such knowledge seems to travel.”\(^\text{12}\) This problem became central to Adrian Johns, whose first monograph stood at the intersection of the history of printing and the history of science. Johns studied the circumstances of book production, distribution and reception “in order to show how print, like scientific truth, attains the level of universality—by the hard, continuous work of real people in real places.”\(^\text{13}\) Such an approach would be worth applying to the history of journalism. During the eighteenth century, each periodical was printed in a specific workshop. Once printed, it traveled to other workshops where it was combined with other written and printed sources to create new periodicals. When a report composed at a specific moment for a particular audience reappeared elsewhere, it was often

---


stripped of references to its origins. Scholars can reconstruct this process by following the movement of paragraphs from one periodical to another, being sure to note any editorial interventions (sometimes subtle or unintentional) that changed the meaning of the text.

To recover the work of the editors, translators, and printers involved in this process, this study also draws inspiration from the field of book history, especially the bibliographic studies of Donald McKenzie. McKenzie defined bibliography broadly as “the discipline that studies texts as recorded forms, and the processes of their transmission, including their production and reception.” He examined texts in search of clues about how they were made, focusing on typography and layout, punctuation and spelling, and the use of indented lines and white space. McKenzie’s method is perfectly suited to the study of periodicals because the comparison of slight differences between versions makes it possible to reconstruct the process of textual transmission. The addition or omission of a comma, for example, not only reveals the chain of evidence (who copied whom), but it also shows how practices of translation and rewriting transformed paragraphs as they circulated. Adapting McKenzie’s methodology to news means highlighting not so much change over time (as he did by comparing editions of William Congreve from 1710 and 1946), but rather movement through space (by tracking a paragraph from, for example, the London Chronicle to the Gazette de la Martinique).

This article focuses on the circulation of news among French and English-language gazettes and includes a few Spanish examples. The links between German, Italian, Dutch, and Portuguese-language periodicals, among others, remain to be studied. After an outline of the rise of the paragraph as a tool for the circulation of news, the work of the editors who selected, translated, and rewrote paragraphs from elsewhere will be considered. Two examples from the American Revolutionary War will be used to illustrate the collective process that linked printers, editors, readers, and ship captains on both sides of the Atlantic. While confirming many of Adams’s observations—the paragraph as the basic unit of news, London as the dominant source of information, and the interdependence of American and European newspapers—this study also emphasizes how the form and meaning of news changed as it traveled. Interdependence did not lead to uniformity: while the paragraph was a printed object that was easily reproduced, it was also a composite text ready to be revamped.

The paragraph is first and foremost a reading technology. The word comes from the Greek *paragraphos* and refers to an inscription made around a selected passage (either in the left-hand margin or below the line) to distinguish it from the surrounding text. The reader’s inscription created a unit of meaning. As Hugh of St. Victor put it at the beginning of the twelfth century, “reading is dividing.” Over time this tool for reading also became a component of writing. With the help of the printing press, the paragraph went from being a sign inscribed in the margins to a distinct textual unit marked off by white space or indented lines. From the sixteenth century, paragraph breaks appeared in royal decrees as well as certain works of natural history and moral philosophy. According to Roger Laufer and Henri-Jean Martin, the use of paragraphs became much more widespread at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century. While these scholars have noted the significance of paragraphs in philosophical texts and novels (where indentation was used to indicate dialogue), it should not be forgotten that newspapers were also important sites for the development of the paragraph. Furthermore, it was in their columns that the paragraph took on a new political role during the eighteenth century.

Periodicals devoted to recent events appeared almost simultaneously in several European cities in the early seventeenth century. The first printed papers, which contained bulletins from various cities and courts, drew upon scribal newsletters already in circulation. The first English *corantos* of the 1620s promised “faithful” translations of Dutch, German, Italian, and French periodicals. The French *Gazette* launched by Théophraste Renaudot in 1631 had access to the monarchy’s diplomatic correspondence, but it also reproduced material from foreign periodicals. Similarly, the official *London Gazette* depended upon European newsletters and gazettes as well as consular dispatches. As Stéphane Haffemayer has suggested, periods of the page were marked with white space.
the circulation of gazettes across an expanding postal network during the seventeenth century contributed to “the birth of a European space of information.”

In England, the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 put an end to prepublication censorship and encouraged the rapid growth of periodicals. Printers and editors began using the word paragraph to refer to short texts “copied from” or “inserted in” a particular newspaper. They indicated the source mainly in cases where they doubted the authenticity of the news. In 1696, for example, the London News-Letter accused the Flying Post of “forging a Paragraph from Vienna.” The Flying Post referred its readers to the Dutch gazette from which it had translated the paragraph. But the London News-Letter insisted that copying from another paper did not excuse the editor of the Flying Post: if he had compared the Amsterdam gazette with that of Haarlem, he would have noticed that the “paragraph from Vienna” was a fake.

With the proliferation of English and then American newspapers in the eighteenth century, “paragraph” became a common term among writers looking to get published in periodicals as well as among printers and editors. Each issue of a newspaper had a set number of pages containing a fixed number of columns. Filling these columns required juggling paragraphs: pieces of text had to be selected, edited, and combined to fit into the available space. A single column contained paragraphs on different subjects drawn from different sources, and these sometimes contradicted each other. In those cases, the paragraph break signaled rupture rather than continuity. Unlike in the scholastic tradition, where paragraphus (in Latin) indicated the next proposition in a line of argumentation, news paragraphs could be individual units of meaning. By liberating paragraphs from the text before and after them, eighteenth-century Anglo-American journalism created a new mode of writing. It became possible to submit a single paragraph to the newspaper. Some printers even set up mailboxes to receive manuscripts after hours so that good citizens could drop off their paragraphs anonymously.

22. An English daily like the Public Advertiser, which had four pages of four columns each, used six compositors to set the type. One of them, Richard Penny, explained in 1774 that he worked with his five colleagues “all together—all present—take different parts—some essays—some paragraphs,” Add. 41,065, fols. 43-45, British Library.
1765, the editor 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.”24 In the vocabulary of the time, letters were written to the printer, but paragraphs were inserted into a newspaper. The insertion of paragraphs was associated with intrigue and cunning, a perception reinforced by the fact that their authors remained anonymous. Readers therefore became suspicious of individual paragraphs that seemed designed to advance commercial or political interests.25

This politicization of the paragraph depended upon the development of a new “press infrastructure” in Britain during the 1760s, as John Brewer’s work has shown. While supporters of John Wilkes used newspapers, pamphlets, and broadsides to spread political messages to an ever-increasing public, the Prime Minister Lord Bute employed his own paragraph writers. One of these writers for hire, John Campbell, described his work this way: “I have ... very carefully watched all the Inflammatory Paragraphs that have appeared in the Papers and have encountered them by other Paragraphs better founded as well as of a better tendency.”26 The paragraph thus became a literary genre adapted to political ends. Political leaders confronted each other through their intermediary paragraph writers, who were in turn ridiculed in the papers. The phrase “paragraph writer” began to appear in London newspapers in the 1760s and became much more frequent in the 1770s before declining in subsequent decades.27 As an example, consider the satirical advertisement for a writing manual entitled The Complete Paragraph Writer, which was addressed to those who wanted to learn “the whole secret of contradicting, evading, misrepresenting, and confounding truth.”28 Although the paragraph writer was at first associated with exchanges between Wilkes and his opponents, the term came to refer to any author of slander, dubious news or unfounded claims.29

29. See, for example, London Evening Post: September 26, 1771; August 30, 1774; November 12, 1774; and March 17, 1778. Middlesex Journal: October 8, 1771; April 16, 1772; and April 18, 1772. Public Advertiser: November 17, 1772; July 3, 1773; and November 3, 1773. Morning Chronicle: May 11, 1773; December 6, 1773; December 25, 1773; January 2, 1775; April 4, 1776; June 26, 1776; and March 30, 1778. Morning Post: August
According to some contemporaries, London had an army of these anonymous writers. Johann von Archenholz, a Prussian visitor to England, was struck by newspapers’ reliance on “the paragraph writers, who go to the coffee-houses and public places to pick up anecdotes and the news of the day, which they reduce into short sentences, and are paid in proportion to their number and authenticity.” In another pamphlet from the era, the (anonymous) author advised readers not to be deceived by the “paragraphical drudges” who wandered the city gathering stories, which they turned over to writers who embellished them, transforming words recorded hastily in coffee shops into elegant and amusing paragraphs ready to be printed. A rare entry in an account book from the period confirms that these “paragraph makers” were sometimes paid. Nevertheless, many paragraphs were written by literary or political figures who did not expect financial compensation.

The fact that readers were being warned about paragraph writers suggests that the paragraph was becoming a powerful weapon in the battle for public opinion. Indeed, it joined forces with other forms of publication, such as the pamphlet, the memoir, and the letter to the printer, each of which had its strengths. In 1785, the English politician Charles James Fox explained his strategy for the press: “Subjects of Importance should be first treated gravely in letters or pamphlets or best of all perhaps a series of letters, and afterwards the Paragraphs do very well as an accompaniment. It is not till a subject has been so much discussed as to become almost threadbare that Paragraphs which consist principally in allusions can be generally understood.”

American cities did not have the same “press infrastructure” as London, but the colonial crisis of the 1760s and 1770s nevertheless generated a politicization of the paragraph. In Boston, for instance, the printing office of Benjamin Edes and John Gill became a kind of press agency where writers, lawyers, and political leaders gathered. One evening in 1769, John Adams participated in the collective preparation of the next day’s Boston Gazette, which consisted of “[c]ooking up
Paragraphs, Articles, Occurrences, & c.—working the political Engine!”

As relations between Great Britain and its North-American colonies deteriorated, Adams and his fellow Americans paid more and more attention to the circulation of paragraphs; words printed in Boston could have an enormous effect in London and vice versa. As Ian Steele’s pioneering study showed, the arrival and departure of ships determined the rhythm of communication between the colonies and the mother country. Each ship brought newspapers filled with paragraphs ready to be copied, criticized, and contradicted.

But the exchange was not limited to Great Britain and North America. The newspapers of Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston depended on the London press for news from Rome, Berlin, and Amsterdam, and European gazettes drew a lot of material from English newspapers. In London, a growing number of papers (there were at least twenty-five during the 1780s) selected bulletins from various places and transformed them into paragraphs ready to be exported. The *Courrier de l’Europe*, a French gazette printed in London, illustrated this process of import-export in a section called “Paragraphs Extracted from English Newspapers.”

As Adams noted during his stay in Europe (first in France, then in Holland and England), the American Revolutionary War was a fruitful period for these exchanges. The war, which eventually involved France, Spain, the Dutch Republic, and several German principalties, rapidly expanded the readership of existing gazettes and encouraged the launching of new periodicals across Europe.

Because European gazettes published a large amount of news from London during the American War, the English-style paragraph became familiar to readers on the continent. Editors of French-language gazettes were already wary of English newspapers, which were full of contradictory reports and debates between the ministerial party and the opposition. During the war, they began to see the “paragraph” as an English genre of writing that should be treated with suspicion. The editor of the *Courrier de l’Europe*, based in London and aware of English journalistic

practice, was careful to warn readers that “the [British] government and the opposition each have their own paragraph makers.”

Whether based in London, Amsterdam, Paris or Avignon, the editors of French-language gazettes sought to impose order and coherence on the panoply of paragraphs printed in London. As Pierre Rétat and Myriam Yardeni have explained, European gazettes situated themselves between “events” and “history” by providing “raw material” to historians while offering “an initial sorting and synthesis of events.” Their editors did not hesitate to combine paragraphs from several English newspapers into a single bulletin (sometimes also called an “article”) to which they added commentary on the credibility of reports. The form of the gazette, which organized the news as a series of bulletins from different cities, encouraged this practice. Meanwhile, the standard presentation of these bulletins (distinguished by date and place of origin) obscured the variety of sources that actually made up each issue. As Claude Labrosse and Pierre Rétat have explained, “Most [of each gazette] was made up of bulletins from the gazetteer’s correspondents in the capitals and cities where the news was collected or of material that came from elsewhere or was copied from other gazettes but took on the appearance [of having come from correspondents].” Although the bulletin was the most visible unit of European gazettes, the paragraph played an important role within each bulletin because it allowed the editor to juxtapose and combine news from various sources.

The interdependence of gazettes was such that even if no copy of the *Gazeta de Madrid* from September 24, 1784 ever reached New Hampshire, paragraphs from the same issue would nevertheless appear there indirectly: they would be translated into French by the *Gazette de France*, then translated into English by the *Independent Chronicle* in Boston, and finally copied by the *New Hampshire Gazette*. Similarly, paragraphs from a newspaper printed in Rhode Island would be copied in London, translated into French in Paris, and then retranslated into Spanish in Madrid.

Printers sometimes specified the route of transmission, as in this example from a Boston newspaper: “The Brussels gazette, in an article from Paris, says, that a letter is come by the way of Leghorn, from an officer of the garrison of Pondicherry, dated the 10th of November 1760.” But most often the true sources of news became obscured as reports traveled from place to place. The Boston printer, for

---

example, did not point out something that his readers had come to expect: he had copied the entire paragraph from an English newspaper and had never actually seen the “Brussels gazette” that he cited (see figure 1).44

Where did foreign news come from before the invention of the telegraph, satellite communications or the internet? By way of example, consider a paragraph published in the London Chronicle on October 15, 1776 under the heading Palma, the capital of Majorca, Sept. 3. It reported that forty-six prisoners attacked their guards near Algiers, seized a ship, and sailed to Palma, where they were now in quarantine. The source of the news was not, as might be expected, a letter sent from Palma to London, but a recycled paragraph. It was first printed in Spanish in the Gazeta de Madrid on September 17, then translated into French in the Gazette de Leyde and the Gazette d’Utrecht on October 11, before being retranslated into English in the London Chronicle four days later (see figure 2).45

Some editors took more liberties than others with the paragraphs they republished, as the following example illustrates. A paragraph from Cairo dated July 1, 1776 was first printed in the Gazette de France on October 14. Five days later, an abridged translation appeared in the London Chronicle. The bulletin’s brief reference to English merchants must have been the point of interest, since the editor stopped translating beyond that section. The Courier de l’Europe copied the Gazette de France’s version word for word, as did the Gazette d’Utrecht. The Gazeta de Madrid published the paragraph under the heading of Cairo, without mentioning that it had been translated from the Gazette de France. The Gazette de Leyde relied on the same source, but its editor added some sentences in which he condemned the Persians’ brutality toward the inhabitants of Basra. This modification, which reveals the editor’s stance, can only be detected by comparing different versions, because a paragraph printed in Paris and modified in Leiden was presented as having come from Cairo, where “by different letters” from Basra “we learn ...” (see figure 3).46

Such examples are far from exceptional: in most cases, foreign news did not come directly from correspondents belonging to the individual gazette, but from other periodicals. Gazettes had a shared convention of announcing paragraphs as coming from Palma or Cairo rather than specifying that they had been translated from Madrid or Paris. Editors did not necessarily seek to deceive their readers. Nonetheless, the organization of gazettes as a series of bulletins from different locations had the advantage of giving visual coherence to the news while avoiding

44. The same paragraph appears word for word on page 306 of the Public Ledger on March 31, 1761 and undoubtedly in other London newspapers.
45. Gazeta de Madrid, September 17, 1776, p. 335; Gazette d’Utrecht, supplement, October 11, 1776, p. 1; and London Chronicle, October 12-15, 1776, p. 366. The Utrecht version would later be copied by the Courier de l’Europe, October 18, 1776, p. 1, col. 3. Another French translation appeared in the Gazette de Leyde, supplement, October 11, 1776, p. 1. There were undoubtedly other versions.
**ATLANTIC HISTORY**

**Figure 1.** Green & Russell’s Boston Post-Boy & Advertiser, June 8, 1761, p. 2, with a mix of paragraphs and advertisements typical of the American press during the colonial era. The paragraph referring to the Brussels Gazette appears in the first column between two paragraphs from The Hague. Image reproduced courtesy of Readex (NewsBank Inc.), Early American Newspapers Series I.
Palma, Capital de la Isla de Mallorca, 3 de Septiembre. Quarenta y seis cautivos destinados a sacar piedra de unas canteras distantes algunas leguas al Poniente de Argel en un sitio llamado Genova, ansiosos de recobrar su libertad y resuelto á emprender cualquiera tentativa para ello, aprovecharon antes de ayer mañana de la ocasión de ver descuidados hacia la orilla del mar y con la escopetas en tierra á los 40 hombres de que se componía la guardia, que estaba para custodiálos, atacaronlos valerosamente sirviéndose de los mismos pincos, palanquetas y demás herramientas de su trabajo, lograron apoderarse de sus armas, y matando á 33 Moros que querian resistirse igualmente que á 11 marineros de 13 que había en el lanchon que servía para acarrear á la Plaza la piedra que ellos sacaban, y obligando á los otros dos á echarse al mar se hicieron dueños de dicho barco. Libres ya, y provistos con 12 fusiles, 2 pistolas, otros tantos trabucos, y 12 taxanes que cogieron en las dos refriegas, se hecharon á navegar, habiendo tenido la fortuna de aportar aquí hoy de madrugada; donde quedan haciendo quarantena en el Lazaret. Entre estos esclavos había 16 Españoles, 17 Franceses, 8 Portugueses, 3 Italianos, un Aleman y un Sardo; todos muy contentos por el feliz exito de su arribo.

De PALMA, Capitale de l’Ile de MAJORQUE, le 3 Septembre. Quarante-six Captifs, employés á tirer des pierres d’une Carrière située á quelques lieues d’Alger, dans un endroit nommé Genova, formèrent le dessein de recouvrer leur liberté; & résolus de tenter fortune ils profiterènt hier de l’inaction des 40 Maures, qui composoient leur garde, & qui, après avoir posé leurs mouquets á terre, étoient tranquilles & oisifs sur le bord de la Mer; Ils les attaquèrent á coups de pies & d’autres instrumens de fer; &, étant parvenus á se rendre maîtres de leurs armes, ils tuèrent 33, de ces Maures, qui vouluient leur résister, ainsi que onze des treize Mariniers, qui étoient dans le Bateau, lequel servoit á transporter les pierres; & ils forcèrent les deux autres à se jetter á la Mer. Alors maîtres de ce petit Bâtiment, armés de douze fusils, de deux pistolets, & de cartouches, ils prirent le large; & ce matin ils ont eu le bonheur d’aborder en cette Rade, où ils font quarantaine au Lazaret. Le nombre de ces Fugitifs, tous très-contens de la réussite de leur entreprise hardie, consiste en 16 Espagnols, 17 Français, 8 Portugais, 3 Italiens, 1 Sarde, & un Allemand.
Le Pacha de cette dernière Ville gouverne toujours avec la plus grande modération ; mais le commerce languit par le défaut de circulation des caravanes, causé par les troubles de Bagdad & de toute la Côte de la Syrie.

London Chronicle, 17-19 October 1776

Yesterday arrived the Mails from FRANCE, HOLLAND, and FLANDERS. Cairo, July 1.

By several accounts from Bassora we hear, that the Persians demand a contribution of 125,000 tomans from the unhappy inhabitants of that city, viz. 100,000 from the Turks, and 25,000 from the Christians, Jews, and Armenian Merchants. They have offered Sader Kan, brother to Kerim Kan, one third of that exorbitant demand, to be paid one tenth in specie, & the rest in merchandize; these accounts add, that the Persian Commander caused 40 persons to be beaten to death, whom he suspected of being against the contribution; that the son of Chick Dervich and one of a rich Turkish Merchant, with two Armenian Merchants, were deputed to Kerim Kan. The English have returned to that city, and are not in the least ill treated, any more than any of the Europeans.

Gazette de France, 14 octobre 1776

Du Caire, le 1er Juillet 1776

On apprend par diverses lettres de Bassora que les Persans exigent des malheureux Habitans de cette Ville une contribution de 125,000 tomans (le toman est évalué 95 l. de France environ) ; sachá la part des Turcs, 100,000, & 25,000 de la part des Chrétiens, Juifs, & Commerçans Arméniens. On offrit à Sader Kan, frere de Kerim Kan, le tiers de cette somme exorbitante, dont on ne peut donner qu’un dixième en especes, & le reste en marchandises. Ces lettres ajoutent que le Commandant des Persans a fait mourir sous le bâton quarante personnes qu’on soupçonnait de s’être refusées à la contribution ; que le fils de Cheik Dervich, celui d’un riche Négociant Turc & deux Négocians Arméniens, ont été députés vers Kerim Kan sur le sort de la Ville et des Habitans ; enfin qu’ils n’ont aucune relation directe ou indirecte avec Bagdad & les autres Villes de la Syrie, & qu’ils s’adressent aux Habitans de la Ville d’Alep pour en apprendre des nouvelles.

Le Pacha de cette dernière Ville gouverne toujours avec la plus grande modération ; mais le commerce languit par le défaut de circulation des caravanes, causé par les troubles de Bagdad & de toute la Côte de la Syrie.

Gazette de Leyde, 22 octobre 1776

DU CAIRE, le 1er Juillet. La conduite modérée, que les Persans paroissent vouloir tenir à Bassora, après la prise de cette Ville, ne s’est point soutenue. On a appris par différentes Lettres, qu’ils ont exigé des malheureux Habitans une Contribution de 125, mille Tomans ; (le Toman est évalué à environ 95, Livres de France) savoir de la part des Turcs, 100, mille ; de la part des Chrétiens, Juifs, & Commerçans Arméniens 25, mille. On auroit offert à Sader-Kan le tiers de cette Somme exorbitante, dont on ne pouvoit même donner qu’un dixième en Espèces, & le reste en Marchandises ; mais ce Commandant, loin de se laisser fléchir par l’impuissance de ces infortunés, & par la misère où ils se trouvent réduits après un Siège aussi long que rude, auroit fait mourir sous le bâton quarante personnes, qu’ils soupçonnent de s’être refusées à la Contribution. Cependant le Fils du Cheik Dervich, celui d’un riche Négociant Turc & deux Négocians Arméniens, avoient été députés vers son Frère Kerim-Kan, Régent de Perse, pour implorer sa miséricorde ; & l’On attendit avec impatience la décision de ce Prince sur le sort de la Ville & de ses Habitans. On apprend par les mêmes Lettres, que les Anglois, qui avoient quitté Bassora à l’ouverture du Siège, sont revenus s’y établir, & qu’ils n’éprouvent, ainsi que les autres Européens, aucune vexation ; qu’on y trouve toujours avec la plus grande modération ; mais le Commerce y languit par le défaut de circulation des Caravanes, causé par les troubles de Bagdad & de toute la Côte de la Syrie.

Gazeta de Madrid, 29 de Octubre de 1776

El Cairo á 1° de Julio. Por cartas de Bassora se sabe, que los Persas exigen de los infelices habitantes de aquella Ciudad una contribution de 125000 tomanes (*), es á saber 100000 de los Turcos, y lo restante de los Cristianos, Judíos, y traficantes Armenios; y que efectivamente ya le ofrecen á Sader Kan hermano de Kerim Kan la 3ª parte de tan exorbitante suma, bien que solo le puedan aproantar en dinero la decima, y lo restante en mercaderías. Añaden dichos avisos, que el Comandante Persa ha hecho quitar la vida á palos á 40 sugetos, que sospechó se oponian al pago de aquella cantidad; que los sitiados enviaron Diputados á tratar con Kerim, cuya decision se aguardaba con impaciencia; que los Ingléses habían vuelto á establecerse en la Ciudad, donde ni ellos ni los demás Européos experimentan vexacion alguna; finalmente que estaba interrumpida toda comunicacion con Bagdad y con las otras Plazas de Siria, siendoles forzoso recurrir á los de Alep para tener por su conducto las noticias.

(*) Cada toman vale 25, pesos.

Figure 3. Four versions of a paragraph from the Cairo (modifications by the Leiden editor in bold).
the clutter that would have resulted from making the source of each paragraph explicit. Moreover, the canonical form of the gazette provided a way of organizing space and time. As Denis Reynaud has suggested, “the division of the gazette into clearly labeled geopolitical sections was not a mere editorial convenience, but the gazetteer’s primary means of asserting a political vision while maintaining the appearance of unshakeable neutrality.”

Correspondents were obviously necessary for procuring news from places that had no printed gazettes or scribal newsletters and for learning about subjects likely to be censored. French-language gazettes often had a correspondent in Paris to provide news not printed in the Gazette de France. However, the most important manuscript sources were not correspondents but other publications, such as the Parisian nouvelles à la main and the Venetian avvisi, which had been circulating since the seventeenth century. Samuel Swinton, the owner of the Courier de l’Europe, pressured his editor in Maastricht (where Swinton launched a publication similar to the Courier) to reproduce the contents of a Paris-based newsletter for his colleagues in Cologne, Amsterdam, Utrecht or Leiden because he knew they all relied on the same source.

According to François Moureau, these “mobile manuscripts” were at the heart of the information system of the Old Regime: “in the absence of news agencies, the printed gazettes fed off the nouvelles à la main, which circulated internationally.” Cities where the gazettes were printed, such as Paris, Rome, and Cologne, “served as transit points for scribal ‘papers,’ which after being translated, adapted, revised, and contaminated, would continue on their journey: the circuit was self-generating.”

The proliferation of printed gazettes in the second half of the eighteenth century led to the creation of digests such as the Gazette des Gazettes and the Journal des Journaux. When Charles Joseph Panckoucke launched the Journal historique et politique (dubbed the Journal de Genève) in 1772, he promised to make it a synthesis of all the European gazettes. Several people were employed to translate paragraphs from English, Swedish, Danish, Russian, Dutch, and German papers. The official

52. Ms. français 22085, fols. 11-12 (pièce 22-23), Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.
gazettes of London, Paris, and Madrid, which each benefitted from access to diplomatic dispatches, became important sources for other periodicals. Yet these three gazettes also depended upon scribal and printed publications.53 In 1778, for example, the Gazeta de Madrid (which mostly relied on French sources) subscribed to eight different periodicals published in Paris. Subscriptions were expensive and editors had an incentive to exchange papers, which the editor of the Madrid gazette did with his counterparts in Paris and Brussels.54

Even in the Anglo-American press, original texts were much less numerous than paragraphs copied from other newspapers. An analysis of the Pennsylvania Gazette conducted by Charles Clark and Charles Wetherell revealed that at least two-thirds of the texts (paragraphs, letters, and essays combined) that appeared in that gazette during the colonial period were taken from other periodicals. Only one text out of ten came from a correspondent.55 During the early republic, and especially during the 1790s, American newspapers changed tone and their editors played an overtly political role, many of them aligning with the “Federalists” or the “Republicans.”56 But the paragraph remained crucial because the influence of political parties at the national level depended on the dissemination of their messages across geographic space. Each side reprinted and criticized the words of the other side’s “paragraphists.”57 The Post Office Act of 1792 gave American printers the right to send a copy of their newspapers to all other printers in the country postage free. This policy dramatically increased the number of newspapers available to editors, who skimmed them looking for paragraphs to republish in a new form, often with the help of scissors and paste.58 But interdependence did not mean standardization. Unlike a centralized system in which an identical newspaper was distributed everywhere, the “free exchange” of newspapers allowed each printer to select paragraphs from elsewhere and adapt them to his local public.59

53. Fraser, The Intelligence of the Secretaries of State, 36-46 and 52; Haffemayer, L’information dans la France du XVIIe siècle, 154-55 and 484-85; and Feyel, L’annonce et la nouvelle, 886.
54. Luis Miguel Enciso Recio, La Gaceta de Madrid y el Mercurio histórico y político, 1756-1781 (Valladolid: Universidad de Valladolid, 1957), 33.
57. See, for example, the paragraph “From the National Gazette” found in the Gazette of the United States, April 18, 1792, p. 407.
Adams was not alone in worrying about how the London press influenced news published elsewhere. During the American Revolutionary War, he and his colleague Benjamin Franklin responded to English reports by sending news to editors in Dutch cities, thus becoming the official “paragraph writers” of the Thirteen Colonies. Franklin even forged an entire issue of the Boston Independent Chronicle at his press in Passy. Hoping to expose the British army’s cruelty before the European public, Franklin sent his false gazette to Amsterdam and The Hague, and excerpts of it eventually appeared in London. The American delegates also worked with Edmé-Jacques Genet, head of the interpreters bureau in Versailles and editor of the Affaires de l’Angleterre et de l’Amérique, a periodical published by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Genet drew paragraphs from the London press and reworked them so as to emphasize British weaknesses and thereby support the American cause.

Genet (whose son would become the notorious “Citizen Genet”) proposed an original idea for strengthening Franco-American relations through the press. He would print an English-language newspaper in Paris and then distribute copies through American printers, who could also “reprint, comment, respond, etc., and thereby increase their readers’ curiosity.” This project was not realized, but some French-language gazettes with a similar goal to neutralize British influence on American public opinion did appear in America during the 1780s and 1790s. In 1789, the Courier de Boston complained about “the plots of speculators and English gazetteers” and boasted of “freeing the confederated Americans from the kind of moral slavery in which they continue to suffer by means of the English public papers, the sole source from which they draw all their opinions.” The Philadelphia-based Courrier de l’Amérique also emphasized the need for Americans to free themselves from the London press and obtain information directly from European periodicals like the Gazette de Leyde. This gazette was also Thomas Jefferson’s favorite, and he urged the editors of various American newspapers to translate excerpts from it. Despite such efforts, the London press remained, in the words of Adams, “an engine by which everything is scattered all over the world.”

The efficiency of that “engine” depended in part on the mobility of the paragraph, a typographical unit ready to be reproduced and commented upon by newspapers in Dublin, Philadelphia, Halifax, and Kingston, Jamaica.

63. Cohn et al., eds., The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, 27:155-56.
65. Courrier de l’Amérique, December 4, 1792.
Editorial Work: “Cutting and Pasting” Paragraphs

In a world where newspapers were made up of excerpts from other newspapers, scissors and paste were essential tools for editors. As Ann Blair and others have shown, the “cut and paste” function in word processing software shares in a long history of reading and writing going back to the Renaissance. To save time and facilitate compilation, the sixteenth-century scholars Conrad Gesner and Girolamo Cardano advised cutting texts with scissors and rearranging the pieces as needed. Nevertheless, when the editor of the first edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1768-1771) quipped that he had “made a Dictionary of Arts and Sciences with a pair of scissors,” he suggested how this practice could seem demeaning to those who preferred to present themselves as writers rather than artisans. The same tension appeared in the political press. In 1790, a reader visited the workshop of Benjamin Franklin Bache, grandson of Benjamin Franklin and printer of the Philadelphia *General Advertiser*. According to this reader, Bache had an ink well and a pen but did not use either, preferring to rely on “a large pair of taylors’ shears.” Surrounded by newspapers, “you cut out of other papers as much [text] as you thought would fill yours.” When the shop assistant arrived asking for more “copy” (a term for the manuscript or printed text to be reproduced), the editor leafed through his newspapers to find the right amount and cut it out on the spot.

This description of editorial work is a caricature. Nevertheless, it reveals how clipping from existing newspapers made an editor’s job easier: by examining a printed page, he could count the number of lines for each paragraph, select the paragraphs that would fill his own columns and arrange them in a collage. More generally, it was easier for printers to work from a printed version of a text than from a written one, which required deciphering the handwriting, correcting the grammar, and counting the words that would fit on each line. Although the work of composition (or typesetting) still had to be done by hand, part of the work involving correcting and line justification had already been done by the printer of the newspaper being copied.

The paragraph facilitated the reprinting of news, but conceptions of literary property and plagiarism were evolving during this period and some editors began to demand “credit” for borrowed texts. Yet practices of citation remained inconsistent.

---

71. Journalistic plagiarism was noticed by French readers as well. In 1777, for example, a reader accused the *Journal historique et politique* of having copied the *Courier de l’Europe* “word for word” without any reference. “Among you Journalists, plagiarism is to a certain extent the norm, and I would not have the slightest objection if it were exercised
In 1805, the editor of the Philadelphia Evening Post attacked “scissors editors” who stole the work of others. “When ... a man takes his scissors and cuts out my article, and gives it to the world as his own, he derives an unfair advantage from my productions, and multiplies his subscribers at my expense.” According to him, editors who thought that they could avoid plagiarism by indicating the name of the city at the top of a column of paragraphs were wrong because “to quote a political paragraph with ‘Philadelphia paper’ at the head or tail of it, when there are seven or eight papers printed in this city, is a mean and despicable way of pilfering.”

Grouping together paragraphs by place of origin was coming to seem obsolete, and some readers began calling for a presentation of news according to its importance, with a clearer separation between each “article.” However, such changes were not yet implemented, and the expression “scissors editors” referred to a practice that continued up to the mid-nineteenth century and beyond.

Newspapers as Collective Works

Behind the layout of newspapers lies the work of the editors who copied, translated, and modified paragraphs. Two events from the American Revolutionary War perfectly illustrate the collective process that was transatlantic journalism in the eighteenth century: the defeat of George Washington at Brandywine, Pennsylvania and the surrender of John Burgoyne’s army at Saratoga, New York. These two events took place in the fall of 1777: in September, the British victory at Brandywine opened the way for the capture of Philadelphia, at that time the capital of the United States. Further north in Saratoga, American forces surrounded General Burgoyne, causing him to surrender his entire army on October 17, 1777. The events are well known, but the surprising way in which they were reported merits study. The first European reports of Burgoyne’s surrender, though based on American sources, were false. By contrast, the first news of Washington’s defeat, though accurate, was not considered authentic in Europe. In both cases, the interpretation of events can be explained by the way the form and content of the news evolved as it traveled from one place to another.
Consider first Burgoyne’s defeat. The news reached the French port of Lorient on October 6, 1777, eleven days before Burgoyne surrendered to General Horatio Gates at Saratoga. The origin of the report was Captain Thomas Thompson, who had just arrived from America. The day of his departure, Thompson passed in front of another ship in Boston Bay. The other ship’s captain had heard that General Burgoyne and his guards had been surprised and overtaken. Thompson remained skeptical about this report, but another American captain who arrived in Lorient the same day had also heard about a major defeat. According to the latter, the Americans had 2,500 British soldiers and taken six hundred of them prisoner during various battles.\footnote{Papers of Benjamin Franklin, 25:59.}

The oral news of the two captains was transcribed, embellished, and circulated across Europe. An excerpt of a letter from Lorient published in the\textit{Courier du Bas-Rhin} reported that the Marquis de la Fayette, at the head of two thousand and five hundred, attacked a group of two thousand British, capturing six hundred and killing the rest.\footnote{\textit{Courier du Bas-Rhin}, October 29, 1777, p. 707 and November 1, 1777, pp. 715-16.} A paragraph from Bordeaux printed in the\textit{Courrier d'Avignon} claimed that it was not Lafayette but the Generals Benedict Arnold and Arthur St. Clair who attacked the British army at Fort Edward and seized General Burgoyne. Two weeks later, this issue of the\textit{Courrier d'Avignon} arrived in London, and the paragraph was translated into the\textit{Morning Chronicle}, which was copied in turn by other English newspapers.\footnote{\textit{Courrier d'Avignon}, October 24, 1777, p. 344; \textit{Morning Chronicle}, November 8, 1777, p. 2, col. 2; \textit{London Chronicle}, November 6-8, 1777, p. 454; and \textit{London Evening Post}, November 6-8, 1777, p. 3, col. 2.} The great “engine” that was the London press then circulated the following paragraph attributed to the \textit{Kentish Gazette}:

\begin{quote}
We are informed by Letters which arrived last Week in the Transports from Quebec, that Burgoyne and his Army, after being several Days surrounded by the Generals Arnold and Conway with 12,000 Men ... surrendered Prisoners of War on the 4th of October last.
\end{quote}

An editorial remark advised readers to “give what Credit they think due to the above Accounts” but promised that the same source had been reliable in the past. The\textit{Public Advertiser} took this whole paragraph from the\textit{Kentish Gazette}, including the editorial warning. The\textit{London Evening Post} copied the version in the\textit{Public Advertiser} but omitted the comment about the credibility of the news.\footnote{\textit{Public Advertiser}, November 18, 1777, p. 2, col. 3; \textit{London Evening Post}, November 15-18, 1777, p. 3, col. 1.} The\textit{Gazette de France}, for its part, translated the paragraph found in the\textit{London Evening Post} but thinly veiled Lafayette’s name. In Paris, Avignon, and Madrid, periodicals reproduced the same paragraph citing letters from Quebec, but in reality their versions all came from the\textit{Gazette de France}.\footnote{\textit{Gazette de France}, November 28, 1777, pp. 479-80; \textit{Courrier d'Avignon}, December 9, 1777, p. 394; \textit{Journal historique et politique}, December 10, 1777, p. 407; and \textit{Gazeta de Madrid}, December 16, 1777, pp. 498-99.}
This reconstruction shows that the stories of Burgoyne’s defeat arriving in Europe between mid-October and mid-November 1777 were combined and distorted through a process akin to the children’s game of telephone. The arrival of a ship led to rumors, which travelled from one newspaper to another, feeding into “Palais-Royal fabrications.” The “false” news anticipated the “real” event—Burgoyne’s surrender to General Gates on October 17—but with differences in the date, location, and people involved. The paragraphs did not mention Gates, who had just taken command of the northern army. Instead, they mentioned officers whose names were familiar from previous stories, such as Arnold and St. Clair, both logical choices for a battle that had supposedly occurred at Fort Edward. By contrast, Thomas Conway and the Marquis de la Fayette, though also familiar names, were actually serving with Washington in Pennsylvania, not with Arnold in the North.

Such mistakes influenced subsequent reports. The inclusion of Lafayette’s name in paragraphs about Burgoyne’s surrender perpetuated a myth in Europe that Lafayette was serving in the North. This myth helped discredit reports of the Battle of Brandywine, the second example here. As usual, news of Washington’s defeat first came from ship captains. Upon their arrival in Liverpool and Glasgow, two captains announced the capture of Philadelphia and the deaths of five to seven thousand Americans. To support their claims, they provided copies of the New York Weekly Mercury dated September 22, 1777. This gazette contained a paragraph reporting the testimonial of a “gentleman” who had just arrived from Philadelphia. He claimed that General Howe had attacked Washington’s army on September 11, killing 750 men and wounding two officers. The British army then attacked two other American brigades, raising the total casualties to “5,000 killed, wounded or taken prisoner.” According to this “gentleman,” when he left Philadelphia the British army was preparing to take the city.

The same New York newspaper contained a letter signed by Washington and published “by order of Congress,” which detailed the American defeat at Brandywine. Yet from the moment this letter was reprinted in London newspapers, it was treated as a forgery, discrediting news of the capture of Philadelphia.

The process by which European readers convinced themselves that Washington’s letter was not authentic demonstrates that the paragraph was not only a means of transmitting news, but also a tool for analyzing news already in circulation. After the republication of Washington’s letter in London, the newspapers contained many paragraphs expressing doubts about its authenticity. First, some readers were hesitant to believe a British victory announced by a New York
newspaper because that city was currently under British control. Paragraphs in several newspapers recalled that the New York Gazette had already published news that was later found to be false or exaggerated. Secondly, Washington’s letter claimed that Lafayette had been wounded during the Battle of Brandywine, but because of previous stories about Burgoyne, readers in Europe thought that Lafayette was part of the northern army. A paragraph in the Public Advertiser, which was later translated in the Courier de l’Europe, quipped: “The Marquis de la Fayette is said to be wounded in two very different and very distant Engagements, both with Washington and with Arnold: The Marquis is said to be a very volatile young man, but with all his Volatility he could scarcely be in both those Places about the same Time.”

The other problem raised by Washington’s letter was that the public did not recognize the author’s style. The Morning Post, a ministerial newspaper, and the London Evening Post, an opposition newspaper, each printed the following paragraph:

The letter published in the New York Gazette of the 22nd of September, signed, ‘G. Washington,’ is reckoned, by no inconsiderable party of politicians, as a hum. Indeed, this epistle is by no means similar to the stile [sic] of that gentleman;—and the humour of ‘the blankets were lost at the men’s backs,’ who were said to have fallen in the action, and the unmilitary phrase of ‘arraying his men behind Chester, for this night’ can only be accounted for by supposing that Washington had lost his senses with the field.

As Jack Lynch has shown, concerns about literary forgery became widespread in eighteenth-century Britain. Some readers were therefore used to examining texts carefully and looking for signs of deception. They tended to be more wary in times of war, when they suspected “speculators” of publishing false news to raise or lower the prices of stocks. Having already read several letters by Washington printed in the newspapers, readers boasted of their ability to judge the authenticity of this one. In this case, the skeptical readers were correct because the phrase “arraying for this night” did not come from Washington. But far from being the invention of a forger, this “unmilitary phrase” resulted from a printing-shop error.

84. London Evening Post, November 11-13, 1777, p. 3, col. 1; Gazette d’Utrecht, November 18, 1777, p. 4; Gazette de Leyde, supplement, November 11, 1777; Journal historique et politique, November 20, 1777, p. 267 and November 30, 1777, p. 322; and Courrier d’Avignon, November 28, 1777, p. 382.
85. See Public Advertiser, November 3, 1777, p. 3, col. 3.
87. Morning Post (November 6, 1777), p. 2, col. 2; London Evening Post (November 4-6, 1777), p. 3, col. 2.
As published in American newspapers, the word used by Washington was “arranging,” not “arraying.” Compositors worked quickly and one of them, probably in Edinburgh, substituted the letter “y” for the pair “ng.” London newspapers perpetuated the mistake because they copied the version that appeared in an Edinburgh newspaper rather than the New York original. The more the letter was analyzed the more it seemed like a forgery; by the time it appeared in Europe, the letter was accompanied by editorial warnings and footnotes pointing out the details that made it suspect. An error in an Edinburgh printing shop shaped the narrative of the war read in Leiden, Avignon, and Madrid.

What conclusions can be drawn from these detailed examples? The example of Burgoyne’s defeat serves as a reminder that false news did not always begin in deceit. The story came together from a range of sources. Upon arrival in Europe, ship captains announced news that inspired paragraphs in the newspapers and the form and content of these reports changed as they traveled from one place to another. It would be wrong to blame individual “paragraph makers” because ultimately the paragraphs read in Avignon or London were collaborative texts, the details of which evolved during the process of writing, translation, and rewriting. Meanwhile, the example of Washington’s letter shows that the interpretation as well as the transmission of news was a collective process. One newspaper expressed suspicion about news first printed in New York. Another pointed out apparent contradictions. Then came criticism of the style, which did not match Washington’s. The newspapers copied and responded to each other; comments by editors mingled with remarks by readers and “paragraph makers.” After two or three days, a consensus emerged: the letter was fake and the British victory doubtful. In fact, the letter was authentic, but the nature of the error was in itself significant: the problem lay not in the critical analysis by readers, which was sound, but in the text itself, which had been corrupted during the process of transmission.

**Politics and the Paragraph**

As a reading tool, the paragraph has existed for a long time, but the spread of newspapers during the eighteenth century transformed it into the basic unit of political news. When marked off by white space or indentation, the paragraph facilitated the transmission of texts from one publication to another. By scanning the pages of other newspapers, printers could select paragraphs they wanted to reproduce for their local public. Meanwhile, the paragraph facilitated critical analysis by giving a name to the bits of text that editors and readers confronted.
For example, it became convenient to refer to “a paragraph inserted in yesterday’s paper” and then give one’s opinion on the identity of the author or the credibility of the claims published there.

Indeed, the political uses of the paragraph were numerous at a time when most news circulated anonymously. Beginning in the 1760s in London, the paragraph became a genre in itself, a new type of publication to complement the political pamphlet and the letter to the editor of a newspaper. People referred to paragraph writers who offered their pens to politicians and speculators. They suspected government officials and other individuals of exploiting the culture of anonymity to spread their own versions of events. This notion of the paragraph as a political tool spread from the London of John Wilkes to the Boston of John Adams and beyond. It became familiar to European readers during the American Revolutionary War, when gazettes in all languages filled up with news from England. Cultural intermediaries such as the *Courier de l’Europe*, based in London but read primarily in France, delivered “paragraphs extracted from English newspapers” to their readers on the continent.

The tradition was renewed in 1789 when the *Révolutions de Paris* published a section entitled “PARAGRAPHS extracted from several English papers.” In this case, the goal was to use English newspapers to track the movements of the “émigrés” and reveal the “secret maneuvers of the royal and aristocratic party.” The proliferation of newspapers in Paris, which offered direct coverage of the Revolution, caused French-language gazettes printed abroad to lose their subscribers. Yet if the French Revolution marked the end of an era for what Simon Burrows called the “cosmopolitan press,” it did not eliminate the role of the paragraph as a vehicle for news and political opinion. In the United States in the early 1790s, Jefferson tried to counteract the influence of anti-French news coming from England with paragraphs translated from the *Gazette de Leyde*. This is but one example, and the multiple and probably contradictory uses of paragraphs during the French Revolution itself would be worthy of study.

As Adams pointed out during the American Revolutionary War, the circulation of paragraphs across an international network of newspapers created new possibilities for the manipulation of public opinion. A paragraph could be inserted in one periodical in the hope that it would be taken up by others. Nevertheless, analysis of the news of Saratoga and Brandywine reveals that this was a complicated game because the “paragraph writers” controlled neither the form in which their writings reappeared nor the meaning that readers gave to them. Editors selected and revised paragraphs. Printers corrected them and arranged them on the page with other paragraphs coming from other places. Readers copied them and retransmitted them, often accompanied by their own comments.

As for reader involvement in the reporting itself, European gazettes did not publish as many letters to the editor as Anglo-American newspapers. However, the more active role of French editors did not cancel out the participation of readers, whose collective analysis sometimes showed up in the pages of gazettes. Consider this paragraph from the *Courier de l’Europe*, which would be picked up (and modified) by at least five other gazettes:

*The Minister is waiting for dispatches and the majority of the public seems satisfied that they will confirm the favorable opinions that we compiled above. Meanwhile a small minority of this same public, which is not so easily persuaded, is busy evaluating [the credibility of reports] by cross-checking the dates of events, the distances between places, travel times, etc., and here are the most judicious observations that have been published on this subject. They are not all from the same pen, and we collected them from different papers.*

The editors who published this mixture of facts and commentary described themselves as “copyists” and “compilers,” and they often praised the virtues of impartiality. Their main sources were scribal newsletters, English newspapers, and European gazettes. The circulation of texts encouraged debate, because as editors copied from each other they also criticized and corrected each other. At the office or the printing shop, they compared and juxtaposed paragraphs. They changed words, deleted sentences, and added commentary, but they rarely cited their sources.

The paragraph was both portable and malleable. As a unit of printing, the paragraph was easily reproduced, but, as a collective work, it was also subject to alteration at each point of transmission. The comparison of periodicals makes it possible to reconstruct publishing practices. The addition or omission of a comma, for example, reveals not only who copied whom, but also how translation and rewriting transformed the news as it circulated. Any analysis of the content of eighteenth-century newspapers should therefore begin with the collective process by which those papers were composed. The attribution of a newspaper text to an individual author should not be overemphasized, lest it obscure the complex processes that led to the final version(s). To better understand eighteenth-century journalism and to clarify the role of newspapers in the revolutions of the Atlantic World, one must follow the trajectory of the paragraph.

Will Slauter

Centre de recherches historiques (EA 1571)
Université Paris VIII
