

The History of American Newspapers

Lecture I: The Colonial Period, the Revolution and the Constitution

The first newspapers in the American colonies were actually advertising sheets with a few diverting stories or a smattering of news reprinted from British newspapers. The first “journalists” were the printers themselves. The first newspapers appeared in port cities – Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston, South Carolina. These were usually weeklies and were printed in small numbers, with distribution to subscribers and to places where people might gather, like taverns or coffee houses. The publication generally did not exceed two pages in length and often consisted of a single sheet. Printing was done on a press that did not differ much from the one Guttenberg used in the late 1400s, with a screw-type mechanism pressing down on a sheet of paper positioned over the moveable type bed. The type would have been set by the printer himself, or perhaps a poorly paid apprentice. In a few cases the paper included a crudely rendered wood cut illustration. Circulation generally ranged from a few hundred to one thousand copies.

At first, the colonial authorities paid little attention to these advertising sheets, but starting in the early 1700s in Boston, the printer James Franklin began to include in his paper, *The New England Courant*, commentary on the local political scene. Franklin’s often unkind comments on the actions of local officials rapidly led to sanctions against the paper and Franklin was forced to conceal his political views in elaborate parodies that the initiated would clearly understand. Given the high literacy rate in Boston and New England generally (estimated at 80 per cent among adult males by 1700), these early sheets developed an avid readership and were often passed from hand-to-hand. Further south the literacy rate declined and few newspapers circulated outside of the major towns, both because of the difficulty of transportation and because of the lower literacy level in the countryside.

As we will see, it was James Franklin’s younger brother, Ben, who was destined to bring the colonies their most successful newspaper, *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, starting in October 1729. In Boston, Benjamin Franklin wrote anonymous articles for James’s newspaper under the pseudonym of Silence Dogood and maintained the practice of writing humorous and moralistic stories for his own newspaper once it was established. Franklin famously stole away first to New York and then Philadelphia, breaking his apprenticeship contract with his brother and eventually learning the printing trade during a one-year sojourn in London in 1724. Franklin’s trip to London had supposedly been paid for by a Philadelphia printer who wanted the young man to learn the trade so he could help his sponsor’s business grow. As it turned out, the “sponsor” really wanted to get rid of Franklin, who only discovered when he arrived in London that his fare had not been paid and that he personally was responsible for covering the cost of his voyage. He earned enough in London to pay back the ship’s captain and then enough to eventually pay for his return trip to Philadelphia. Working with master printers in London, however, the eighteen-year-old Franklin absorbed enough knowledge of the trade to outclass any other printer in the city of Philadelphia.

Upon his return, the enterprising young man signed on as a master printer with a Philadelphia shop but soon discovered that, once again, he was being taken advantage of and once again struck out on his own with financial assistance from a friend, or a friend’s father. The friend turned out to be a heavy drinker and not really interested in being a printer. Franklin borrowed money from two other men he knew through his philosophical discussion society “The Junto,” and bought out his partner. With equipment imported from Great Britain, he began a newspaper and a general printing company that went on to be the most successful publishing house in colonial America.

The Pennsylvania Gazette, a weekly four-page newspaper, soon attracted a large readership in Philadelphia and produced enough profits from advertising and subscriptions to enable Franklin to start sister newspapers in Charleston, South Carolina and Providence, Rhode Island. He even published a German-language newspaper in Philadelphia briefly during the 1730's. Although unsuccessful at the time, German-language newspapers would become popular in the 1850's with the large influx of German immigrants in places like New York, Cincinnati, Saint Louis, Milwaukee and Chicago. As was so often the case, Franklin was a man ahead of his time. With the growth of the colonial postal service (Franklin became postmaster at Philadelphia in 1737), the little newspaper acquired many subscribers in rural areas reachable by mail. (Supposedly Franklin got permission from the British authorities to have the postal couriers carry his newspaper to subscribers free of charge). Franklin then added his famous *Poor Richard's Almanac* to his array of publications. This annual compilation of facts and figures along with amusing anecdotes and memorable sayings remained a staple of colonial reading from 1732 to 1756.

Franklin followed (and in some ways blazed) the path of many early newspaper publishers: he was a printer who possessed both a talent for this demanding craft and a man of widespread knowledge who could write articles that grabbed readers' attention and could re-write news dispatches arriving from Britain and elsewhere to make them more understandable and interesting to the colonial reading public. Franklin even penned numerous "Letters to the Editor," using various pseudonyms and sometimes even printed answers to his own (disguised) letters! For several years, he was essentially a one-man-band, writing much of the newspaper and at least supervising the printing and distribution of the finished product. Historians judge Franklin to have been the best writer and anecdotist of the mid-1700s in the colonies, although much of his work was published under pseudonyms so he failed to get much credit at the time.

Newspaper publishers to the present day are likely to display Franklin's famous dictum about the proper role of the press. This appeared in the *Gazette* on June 10, 1731 under the title "An Apology for Printers." Printers (what we would today call "publishers") are "educated in the belief that when men differ in opinion, both sides ought equally to have the advantage of being heard by the public; and that when truth and error have fair play, the former is always an overmatch for the latter." Of course Franklin had his own opinions, but he tried judiciously to present the opinions of others in fair and complete fashion and to let the reader decide which side to support. This is, of course, the ideal of an objective journalism, but, as we shall see, it is not the only kind of journalism, or even the kind of journalism most often practiced in America from colonial times up to the present.

Perusing the early issues of the *Gazette*, we see that much of the four-pages featured humorous or otherwise attention-grabbing stories, most of which were made up by Franklin himself, often based on some incident in the city of Philadelphia or the surrounding countryside. Since much of what he wrote was apocryphal (not really true), Franklin had to be rather vague in covering the cardinal journalistic questions of who, when, where, how, and why. Increasingly, the paper gained advertisers who wanted to sell something or -- in almost every issue -- were asking for help in locating and bringing back an escaped servant. Although the servants were often enslaved Blacks, just as often they were poor immigrants from Europe who were working off their indentures, but could easily flee since, unlike Blacks, they could simply melt into the crowd. The *Gazette* also carried tidbits of foreign news picked up from newspapers arriving on ships from Europe or the West Indies. These news articles could be as varied as a report on the meeting of the Polish parliament in 1733 or conflicts with the Moorish princes along the Mediterranean coast. Philadelphia at the time was still the colonies most important seaport, a position lost to New York City by the end of the 1700s.

Franklin was appointed "Clerk" of the Pennsylvania General Assembly in 1736 and served in that position until his election to the Assembly in 1751. During his tenure as clerk and then as a member of the Assembly, Franklin remained publisher of the *Gazette*. The conflict of interest obvious to our eyes

today seems not to have troubled either Franklin or other Assembly members. He remained in the majority party until the election of 1764, when he lost his seat in an election that turned on the question of whether the colony should remain a “proprietorship” governed by the Penn family or convert to a royal colony with a governor appointed by the King. Franklin had long led opposition to the Penn’s proprietorship, but in this election Penn’s party enjoyed strong support in his Philadelphia district and he had to give up his position as Speaker of the Assembly to which he had been elected just a few months earlier.

The melding of journalistic and political careers will be a notable feature of the American press right up through the Second World War. Publishers often aspired to public office, including the presidency. During the colonial era, Franklin used his political contacts to increase his newspaper’s income: the *Gazette* long held the contract to publish the official versions of speeches by Assembly leaders and even the Penn-appointed governors. As already noted, he also held the position of Assistant Postmaster General during the colonial period and (briefly) the position of Postmaster General in the new United States after 1776. Franklin could maintain this balancing act between politics and journalism because of his canny sense of which way the political wind was blowing and his undoubted dedication to the public good. He, in fact, did well by doing good, of which his creation, Poor Richard, would have heartily approved.

In 1748, Franklin formed a partnership with David Hall, who he had invited to Philadelphia in 1743 upon the recommendation of his English friend and correspondent William Strahan. Hall, a very competent printer and a man of good character would manage the business and pay Franklin 467 pounds a year from the profits, keeping the rest for himself. In this way, Franklin freed himself from the day-to-day work of preparing the newspaper and running the printing shop’s other activities and devoted himself instead to his wide-ranging scientific and philosophical activities. The partnership with Hall lasted until 1766

In contrast to Franklin’s cozy relationship with the authorities in Pennsylvania was the experience of John Peter Zenger, a printer who trained in Philadelphia under Franklin’s one-time competitor William Bradford. Zenger moved to New York and established his own newspaper, *The New York Weekly Journal*, in that city in 1733 and soon plunged into political controversy. His name has since been connected with the cause of freedom of the press. Zenger, at the behest of political opponents of the New York governor William Cosby immediately began a mocking campaign against the governor and his supporters. Cosby’s administration was notoriously corrupt and Cosby himself was a man of poor character, but Zenger would not have carried on a newspaper campaign against him and his administration had it not been for the *sub rosa* financial support provided by Cosby’s opponents.

After several unsuccessful attempts to silence Zenger, Cosby finally managed to find a judge who would declare Zenger’s writings libelous and the publisher was put on trial. In 1735, when the trial took place, it was enough for a judge to declare that something published in a public paper was libelous for the publisher to be put on trial. If it could then be shown that the defendant was the author of the libelous work, the jury had no choice but to find him guilty. But Zenger’s lawyer, Andrew Hamilton (no relation to Alexander Hamilton), argued that if the published work did not say anything that was untrue, it could not be considered libelous. In other words, the plaintiff had to prove to a jury that the statements were false; it was not enough for a *judge* to say they were libelous. The jury ended up finding Zenger innocent. The history of libel law in America did not change immediately, but in 1804 another Hamilton, Alexander this time, argued in court that statements in a scurrilous sheet called *The Wasp* that were declared libelous under a New York state law, were factual and therefore could not be considered libelous under the law. As it happened, the jury still found *The Wasp*’s publisher guilty of libel, but Hamilton’s arguments struck home among defenders of freedom of the press and eventually became the standard for judging whether or not something was libelous. It was during this trial that Hamilton made some remarks about Aaron Burr while in an Albany tavern that led to a challenge to a duel and Hamilton’s death. Since this trial in

1804, American libel law has remained more liberal than similar laws in Great Britain and our newspapers and other media enjoy a greater degree of protection from libel lawsuits than that found in other countries.

The run-up to the American Revolution did not affect most of the weekly press until after the outbreak of hostilities in April 1775. The newspapers did protest, however, the imposition of the Stamp Tax in 1765 and many simply refused to buy stamps or closed down their newspaper business. Each copy of a newspaper had to pay a tax of one penny per page which was both costly and inconvenient. Pamphlets were also taxed, but not books. Often the stamps were not easily obtained, since stamp issuing officials had been cowed by threats from anti-tax mobs in the major cities. The tax was repealed by Parliament less than one year after being imposed and this quieted the uproar.

Franklin badly misjudged the impact of the Stamp Tax on the colonies and severed his relationship with the *Gazette* altogether at the end of 1766 after the controversy had blown over, but not before a mob threatened to destroy his house in Philadelphia. Franklin himself had left for Britain in early 1765 before the tax had been passed by parliament and was badly out of touch with sentiment at home. Hall continued to print the paper and featured numerous reports on protest resolutions passed by the Massachusetts and other colonial assemblies, without editorial comment. The Sons of Liberty, born in response to the stamp tax, used direct action to prevent the distribution of the tax stamps, intimidating those appointed by the Crown to issue the stamps and enforcing a quasi-boycott on British imports in order to put pressure on Parliament to repeal the Act. The ten years between the Stamp Act uprising and the outbreak of hostilities at Lexington and Concord was a period of turbulence for the newspaper business and the colonies generally.

Political opinion pieces generally came out in the form of pamphlets during the 18th century. Newspapers sought to avoid political controversy for the most part, fearing to alienate some part of their readership if they waded into these troubled waters. Even so, some newspapers were known to favor strong ties with Great Britain, the so-called Tory Press, while others were frequently critical of the Mother Country's impositions. Among the most famous of the latter were two, "patriotic" newspapers published in Boston, the *Boston Gazette* and Isaiah Thomas's *Massachusetts Spy*. The *Gazette* carried inflammatory articles penned by Samuel Adams under various pseudonyms. Starting with the anti-Stamp Tax agitation 1765 and then reigniting after the March 1770 "Boston Massacre," Adams sought to inflame relations with Great Britain. He is even credited with coining the term "Boston Massacre" to describe the bloody encounter between a mob and British sentries outside the Boston customs house. Adams's -- and the *Gazette*'s -- most notable contribution to the building revolutionary fervor came in December 1773 when the printing shop's premises became a gathering spot for men dressed up as Indians who joined other disguised "Sons of Liberty" to throw the tea into Boston harbor. The *Gazette*'s articles on these various agitations were picked up by other colonial newspapers, creating a wide-ranging sense of injustice leading up to the Revolution. Thomas's account in the *Massachusetts Spy* of the opening battle of the Revolution at Lexington, Massachusetts in April 1775 was, if anything, more stirring and patriotically rousing than even Adams's pieces. Reprinted by other newspapers throughout the colonies it served to galvanize opposition to the British. He wrote, in part:

Americans! Forever bear in mind the BATTLE of LEXINGTON! Where British Troops, unmolested and unprovoked wantonly, and in a most inhuman manner fired upon and killed a number of our countrymen, then robbed them of their provisions, ransacked, plundered and burnt their houses! Nor could the tears of defenseless women, some of whom were in the pains of childbirth, the cries of helpless babes, nor the prayers of old age, confined to beds of sickness, appease their thirst for blood! – or divert them from the DESIGN of MURDER and ROBBERY!

Sam Adams and Isaiah Thomas were not journalists, as we know them today. They were agitators who used the medium of the press to spread their message. They were propagandists who little regard for truth or objectivity in pursuit of what they viewed as a higher good: a break with Britain and the creation of an independent American nation. As such, they formed an important element of the American newspaper (and later media) scene and their approach to the news provided a powerful counterpoint to Benjamin Franklin's ideal of presenting "both sides of the story."

Some of the newspapers carried political cartoons or images, such as a skull and crossbones indicating how the Stamp Act would lead to the death of the newspaper. Political cartoons and other illustrations were hard to print, since the printing block had to be hand carved and then placed in the form that held the type. The results were often unclear. The first such cartoon appeared in Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* in May 1754 following the Albany Congress, a meeting to which a number of colonies sent representatives and which Franklin and others hoped would lead to a united opposition to the French threat at the time. The cartoon entitled "Join, or Die" featured a segmented snake, with each segment labeled as one of the colonies. Presumably, if the colonies did not unite, they would be chopped into pieces by the French, like the unfortunate snake. When the Revolution finally arrived, newspapers carried caricatures of King George and his various ministers, now viewed by patriots as the authors of the colonists' woes and the cause of the war.

While the newspapers served an essential information function during the long conflict, there was actually a notable attrition of the press from 1775 to 1781. At the outset of the Revolution there were 37 newspapers in the colonies, mainly weeklies, but by October 1781 after the Battle of Yorktown ended the actual fighting, only twenty newspapers were still in operation (Tebbel, p. 52). One English observer in New York with the British troops expressed astonishment at how influential the newspapers were and wrote in a letter home "with what avidity they are sought after, and how implicitly they are believed, by the great Bulk of the People. . . ." (Quoted in Tebel, p. 53). In fact, the newspaper during the Revolution started to replace the pamphlet as the vehicle for placing political opinion before the reading public. With the quashing of the Tory minority in the country during the Revolution, newspapers would soon become the favored means for contending parties within the new country to carry on their political warfare.

Newspapers served an important purpose in the ratification process of the new national constitution in 1787 and 1788, when Hamilton, Madison and Jay published a series of articles in the New York *Independent Journal* which were then reprinted in other newspapers throughout the colonies and came to be known as the *Federalist Papers*. The idea to submit these articles in support of the draft Constitution had been Hamilton's, its aim being to persuade New York's ratifying convention to approve the new system of government. In the event, the articles probably had little impact on the decision, which eventually came down on the side of approval, but only after word reached Albany that the Virginia convention had approved the document, and this was the ninth state to approve, making it clear that New York had little choice but to sign-on to the new order. Hamilton will continue to be a strong supporter of newspapers as a means of reaching the public with his "federalist" ideas, helping to birth the *Gazette of the United States* in the 1790s and then the *New York Evening Post* in the early 1800s.

The development of newspapers as the organs of political combat will be much deplored by Washington and John Adams, who disliked newspapers in general, viewing them as scurrilous sheets full of lies and damaging innuendo. But, as we shall see in the next lecture, they were embraced by party leaders like Hamilton and Jefferson and became an essential part of the emerging American democratic republic.