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Early History of the English Newspaper

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British Library

Various source media, 17th and 18th Century Burney Newspapers Collection



In England, news began to be circulated in print early in the 16th century in publications referred to as 'Relations'. The earliest surviving example of these forerunners of the English newspaper is an account of the Battle of Flodden in 1513, published as a small pamphlet under the title *Hereafter Ensue the Trewe Encountre or Batayle lately Don betwene Englande and Scotlande*.¹ Some years later, in 1542, another small pamphlet gave *Hevy Newes of an Horryble Earthquake* near Florence, Italy.² *A Cotype of a Letter Contayning Certayne Newes, & the Articles or Requestes of the Devonshyre & Cornyshe Rebelles*, published as a quite substantial pamphlet in 1549, is often cited as the first English newsletter.³ These, and others like them, appeared occasionally and in increasing numbers during the late 1500s. News did not begin to be printed more regularly and within periodical publications in England until the early 17th century.

Corantos

News periodicals were established in several countries in continental Europe soon after 1600, but a Star Chamber decree of 1586 forbade the publication of news in England. The first news periodicals in English, called corantos, were printed in Amsterdam.⁴ The earliest surviving coranto, *The New Tydings Out of Italie Are Not yet Come*, dated 2 December 1620, is a single sheet printed on both sides with news of the Thirty Years War then raging in Europe. Less than a year later, the first coranto to be printed in England appeared. The first surviving issue, *Corante, or Newes from Italy, Germany, Hungarie, Spaine and France*, dated 24 September 1621, contains continental news translated from a German original.⁵ Its printer, Nathaniel Butter, acquired an official licence and, in

partnership with the bookseller Nathaniel Bourne, went on to publish an irregular series of such corantos until at least 1640. Estimates suggest that between 250 and 850 copies of each coranto were printed.

Civil War Newsbooks

The corantos soon changed from single sheets to small pamphlets, the format of their successors the newsbooks. The opening of the Long Parliament in November 1640, on the eve of the English Civil War, began a period of rapid change. The first newsbook containing domestic rather than foreign news, titled *The Heads of Severall Proceedings in This Present Parliament*, began publication in November 1641.⁶ It was followed by many others. As the Civil War became more bitter, newsbooks were published to provide propaganda for each side. *Mercurius Aulicus*, first published 8 January 1643, supported King and court. It was answered by *Mercurius Britanicus*, from 29 August 1643, for Parliament. These were the first of many newsbooks with titles beginning 'Mercurius', named after Mercury, messenger of the gods in classical antiquity. The women who sold newsbooks became widely known as 'Mercury Women'. The desire for news was such during the Civil War and Commonwealth that during the 1640s and 1650s over 300 differently-titled newsbooks appeared, although most of them did not last. According to estimates, up to 1,500 copies of each of the more successful newsbooks may have been printed.

Restoration Newspapers

Following the restoration of Charles II to the throne in 1660, control over the press (which had been relatively

lax during the previous 20 years) was reasserted. The Printing Act of 1662 specified that every work must be licensed before it could be printed. The *Oxford Gazette* was established as a government newsbook in 1665, and succeeded by the *London Gazette* in 1666. Its format as a single sheet, printed on both sides, earned it a description as the first English newspaper.⁷ Although the Printing Act could not be strictly enforced, it did act as a deterrent to the publication of new titles. When it lapsed between 1679 and 1685, several unlicensed newspapers appeared. When it lapsed again in 1695, and was not renewed, the effect on the press was marked. The number of new titles again increased, and several successful and long-lasting newspapers were established. Where the earlier newsbooks had been weekly, and the *London Gazette* appeared twice a week, these morning posts were published three times a week - reflecting the public appetite for news and comment. Among them were the *Post Boy* (1695-1728) and the *Post Man* (1695-1730).

Eighteenth-Century Newspapers

The first and most significant development of the new century was the publication of the first English daily newspaper, the *Daily Courant*, which began on 11 March 1702. The 18th century was a period of innovation and evolution for newspapers. The *Daily Courant*, like earlier newspapers, appeared in the morning. The next development was the evening paper, which initially appeared three times a week. The *Evening Post* (1709-1732) is said to be the first newspaper with the word 'evening' in its title.⁸ Several of these evening newspapers enjoyed long runs, for example the *Whitehall Evening Post* (1718-1801). Periodicals like

the *Tatler* (1709-1711) and its successor the *Spectator* (1711-1712), influenced the content of newspapers. Nathaniel Mist's *Weekly Journal, or, Saturday's Post* (1716-1725) was one of the earliest titles to emulate them by including a leading essay, and this was taken up by the *Country Journal; or, the Craftsman* (1727-1750) which, like Mist's *Weekly Journal*, was an anti-government newspaper.

Although the Printing Act was not renewed after 1695, newspapers were not free of government control. The Stamp Acts of 1712 and 1725 made them subject to taxes on paper and advertisements. In 1735, the prime minister Sir Robert Walpole was instrumental in closing down several government-backed newspapers, including the *Daily Courant*, and replacing them with the *Daily Gazetteer* (1735-1746). The Stamp Acts affected both the format and the content of newspapers. The *Universal Spectator* (1728-1746) and the acerbic *Grub Street Journal* (1730-1737) were among those to adopt a four-page format, with an essay on the front page, news on pages two and three, and advertisements on the back page.

The mid-18th century saw the introduction of a new, smaller format of newspaper, with eight pages instead of four. Like periodicals, these included a variety of articles. The first such title was the *London Chronicle* (1757-1765). Daily newspapers, with their promise of currency, remained popular throughout the period. Among others, there were the *Daily Post* (1719-1746), the *Gazetteer and London Daily Advertiser* (1753-1764) and, most important of all, the *Public Advertiser* (1752-1794). Some of the morning papers

were very long-lived, for example the *Morning Chronicle* (1769-1862), the *Morning Post* (1772-1937) and the *Morning Herald* (1780-1869). Another innovation was the evening daily, the first of which was the *Star* (1788-1831), although these were never as popular as the morning titles. As the century drew to a close, and competition increased, some newspapers became more self-conscious of their appearance, for example the *World* (1787-1794) in which John Bell made significant changes to typeface and layout. By the end of the period newspapers carried far more than just social and political news - they had essays and articles, including book and theatre reviews, letters, and other types of comment, and a huge variety of advertisements. The 18th century was a period of staggering growth in newspaper circulation. The Stamp Act duties suggest annual circulations of 2.4 million copies in 1713, 7.3 million in 1750 and 16 million in 1801.⁹ Such figures indicate that the newspaper was within the reach of almost everyone.

ENDNOTES

¹ The British Library has a copy, shelfmark C.123.d.23.

² The British Library has a nearly complete copy, shelfmark C.40.a.19.

³ Lambeth Palace Library has a copy.

⁴ The word 'coranto' derives from 'current', with the sense both of 'up-to-date' and a 'stream' of news.

⁵ The British Library has the only known copies of these corantos, shelfmark C.55.l.2.

⁶ Copies of this and other titles mentioned later in this essay, without reference to the location of copies, may be found in the Burney Newspapers.

⁷ The Oxford English Dictionary records the first use of the term 'news paper' in 1667.

⁸ The Burney Newspapers include two issues of the *Evening Post* dated 1706, indicating that the newspaper was founded before 1709.

⁹ Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (Aldershot: Gregg Revivals, 1991), p. 105.

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