The English Press in the Long Eighteenth Century

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To read newspapers from this period is to be taken into the news, the hopes, the fears and the culture of these years. There are of course many limits to the coverage by newspapers and to the value of newspapers, and it is a responsibility of the scholar to draw attention to them. At the same time, to do so can entail a failure to understand, or at least a tendency to underplay, the major impact of the press of the period. In opposition to the earlier theme of an early modern printing revolution has come that of a slower and more qualified process. There is considerable basis for this revision, but also a danger of underplaying the significance of change in an age before mass literacy.

The Nichols Newspapers Collection reflects the enormous differences brought about by the combination of a new regulatory regime after the Glorious Revolution of 1688–89 with the entrepreneurial drive of newspaper producers in the decades from the 1690s. The lapsing of the Licensing Act in 1695 led to a situation in which anybody could start a newspaper. It was relatively simple for printers to test a market by setting up a newspaper and, if it failed, concentrate on other activities. This lack of specialisation reflected the absence of any need for specific equipment or trained staff for newspaper production (although stamped paper was required), and, therefore, the relatively limited investment required when founding a paper. The absence of a system of privilege, akin to that on the Continent, permitted a growth in the number of titles. A saturated market ensured a competitive atmosphere and a large number of failures.

These differences are all the more impressive because much of the context was fixed. This was especially the case with the technologies at stake – and not only the more familiar printing press. Papermaking and energy provision were also essential, as well as distribution technologies, in the form of vehicles and routes. Low sales for individual titles reduced the capital resources available for investment in new work processes and technology, and also the need for such investments. Thus, even when steam technology became available, there was no hurry to apply it. The first newspaper that embraced the new technology, in the shape of steam presses, was The Times in 1814. In having the largest sales, it had both need and capital for technological change.

The fundamental market constraints did not alter. There was no significant growth in population until the mid-eighteenth century, and none in per capita literacy until the nineteenth. In addition, taxation remained a fundamental constraint on newspaper operations until the start of the 1860s and the real costs posed by taxation rose during the eighteenth century.

Change within a context of fundamental continuity is particularly interesting. Rather than being able to respond to greatly increasing demand, and only needing to hold on to the share of the market in order to make a profit (as is sometimes the case across history), entrepreneurs had to shape a largely fixed, as well as competitive, environment. Economic difficulties, notably in the 1690s, worsened the problem. At the same time, the opportunities were great. These took a number of forms. The provision of, and demand for,
news and advertising are especially noteworthy. What was the largest press in the world, in terms of number of titles and circulation, provided plentiful opportunities for the spread of new ideas, such as new products. In doing so, the press also offered opportunities for a national standardisation of material. This was true not only of opinions, but also of information. Advertisements contributed to this. Thus, on 26 May 1744, Old England advertised A Complete Tything Table that would also be available from named agents in Reading, Gloucester, Northampton, Salisbury and Birmingham, each of which was prominent in the provincial press.¹

There was a democratic, or at least representative, character to the press, in that it was dependent on readers for sales and for advertising revenue, and advertised its popularity. This popularity was built upon a receptiveness to the public mood, and so it defined a particular tone of writing accordingly. In providing readers with a considerable range of information and opinion about politics, newspapers offered the continual refrain that the views of the readers counted, which also directed attention to the significance of the press.

There were also important organisational changes alongside essential technological continuity. In particular, the national distribution of London newspapers became more rapid and reliable as a consequence of improvements in the road system and in the provision of Post Office services.

Politics and the Press: A Close Bond?

Britain was involved in war for most of the period from 1689 to 1720 and, subsequently, in war panics. Full-scale hostilities revived in 1739 and lasted until 1748. This situation pressed on the anxieties and interests of the public, and the press responded. Their response was intertwined with political partisanship. The newspapers of the period were, therefore, not only full of foreign news, but also reported and commented on it in a fashion that would have meant much to a politically informed reading public.

Indeed, the press was the prime means for doing so. Parliament only sat for a small portion of the year and there were major limits on the reporting of its debates. Political parties did not have national organisations nor memberships in the modern fashion. Thus, far from being tangential, the press served to provide key means to create a sense of party identity, and of an identity that was able to respond to changing circumstances. This helped to explain the degree to which politicians believed it important to support, influence or control the press. These processes were readily apparent during the reign of Queen Anne (1702–14) and contributed greatly to the press wars of these years, if that is not too grand a term for the serious rivalries between newspapers. These wars focused on foreign, military and ecclesiastical policy, all of which were discussed in the press in a far more continual fashion than was possible for Parliament, which sat for less than half the year. In the press, moreover, all sides could initiate discussion and seek to control the agenda in a fashion that was not possible in Parliament.

¹ Old England, 26 May 1744.
On 7 August 1733, the Hyp-Doctor, a London newspaper, reported:

The article of public papers is now swelled to a considerable size, and, among them, the political is not the least considerable. They have multiplied in proportion to the contests of parties, bred from the warmth of opposition.

The press’s role in electioneering helped to ensure the dissemination of reports and opinions about politics. In 1733, a Kent vicar wrote: 'The enclosed Canterbury newspaper [which is dispersed over the county] will do us a great deal of mischief unless the edge of it be taken off by something handsomely written on the other side.' That he wrote this to Lionel, 1st Duke of Dorset, the local Whig political grandee and a figure in national politics, indicated the overlap of different types of politics. The inclusion of items from newspapers in commonplace books was another indication of their influence.

‘Newspaper Wars’: Politics and Economics

The phrase ‘all sides’ captures the extent to which politics was more than a question of Tories and Whigs, for within each faction there were fierce divides. In addition, politics was a broader process. Whereas only a portion of goods and services were advertised, most political groups and single interest lobbies sought to use the culture of print in order to transmit their messages, and to organise, encourage and recruit supporters. Linked to these and other divisions, there were quarrels between particular newspapers, for example those supporting Hanoverian or Jacobite Tories, or government and opposition Whigs. Reading newspapers in bulk provides the best means to chart and understand these alignments and tensions, not least because this approach helps explain the adversarial source, as well as character, of much reporting.

The particular value of the Nichols Collection is that it is arranged by period, rather than by the more usual focus on individual titles. It therefore becomes possible to see newspapers in terms of the contention of the time. This is of great value as it offers a means to assess the significance of responsiveness to content, and the success with which it was pursued. The battles between the papers of Nathaniel Mist and what he called the ‘Lying Post’, in other words the Whig Flying Post, emerge more clearly in this context. There was little consistency, for individual titles were very dependent on the energy of particular writers and on the interplay of circumstances. For example, in the late 1730s, the opposition press re-centred around effective new newspapers, mainly the Champion and Common Sense, after its key newspapers of the late 1720s had lost vigour.

The press was also grounded in commercial society. Its news, of sailings and battles, adverse winds and privateers, was of immediate relevance to merchants and others involved in commerce. Indeed, given the significance of exports and imports for the economy as a whole, news of trade, and thus of the wider world,
was of far greater importance. These relevances linked directly to politics as the risk of disruption owed much to Britain’s international position. This linkage was debated extensively in the press as part of its political coverage.

The newspapers of the period also offer comments on the specific factors guiding individual titles. This gives an unprecedented insight into the press as a whole, as the latter was an aggregate of the former. Although often appearing at random, there are many remarks of relevance. These include comments located within the text, as well as more coherent accounts when newspapers were launched or, far less consistently, ceased production. It is also valuable to consider advertisements as an aspect of the economics of individual papers.

One of the most interesting newspapers in the Collection is Mist’s Weekly Journal, a Tory, pro-Jacobite London newspaper produced by the aforementioned Nathaniel Mist. It is written in an accessible, often jocular form. It was not a paper that adopted, as for example the Craftsman did, the straightjacket of long front page editorial articles at the expense of other means of conveying opinion.

Other themes that emerge are the political contention of the early years of the reign of George I (1714–27) and the dynamism of the press prior to the launch of the Craftsman in 1725.

Rewriting Press History with the Nichols Collection

It is the rewriting of press history offered by this Collection that is of particular value, as well as the consideration of its broader significance. The latter helps explain the limits of Whig oligarchy. Both J.H. Plumb and J.P. Kenyon discussed the 1710s in terms of the formation of such an oligarchy. This constituted a background to the strength of the Whig establishment during the Walpole ministry (1720–42) and the Pelhamite ascendancy which ran from 1743 and more clearly 1744 to 1754 with an important after-echo to 1762.

However, this account emerges from a consideration of the press as far too limited. It underplays the dynamism of public politics, as well as its contents. An understanding of both is best offered by the press, and this also provides a useful way to approach the supposed novelty of mid-century politics, especially that of the 1760s. This latter standard approach, as developed in particular by John Brewer, asserts a novelty that cannot be justified if the nature of politics earlier in the century is appreciated. Indeed, the 1690s, 1700s, 1710s and 1720s included both episodes of public agitation, such as the Sacheverell disturbances, but also, more profoundly, a growing habit of very regular reception and discussion of the news by means of more frequent and freer newspapers. This was especially true at the London level, but was also the case across provincial England, as well as elsewhere in the British Isles.

This discussion was central to a transformation of political culture, and to the development of British
society. It ensured the grounding, through debate and usage, of the Revolution Settlement, and to the growing gaps between political culture in the Anglosphere and the rest of the world. Indeed, it is in the comparative context that the value of the Collection emerges especially strongly. To contrast the English newspapers of the period with their French counterparts is to be struck by the extent to which the latter are more rigid and uniform in content, coverage and tone. Although tone may seem intangible, it was of great significance. An appreciation of the tone of discussion rests on reading newspapers in bulk.

So also with a guide to content. For example, an understanding of the role of history in the thought of the period is best served by looking at the repeated references to historical examples. Journalists frequently traded arguments in terms of historical analogies. Thus allegedly bad ministers were discussed in terms of Sejanus, Wolsey or Buckingham. This was not because it as impossible to address the supposed ills of Walpole, but rather because historical analogies were regarded as relevant. Not least this was because the present and the future were very much seen in terms of a continuity in which the past played a key role. In particular, there was an assumption that historical processes occurred across time and could recur. Critics of the government, such as Mist, argued not only that the Glorious Revolution was imperfect but also that a return to whatever was held reprehensible was more than probable. In short, history was a lesson about the inherent possibilities of the future. Newspapers did not simply record; they also warned about danger. The extent to which the press contained and represented the hopes, fears and experiences of the age refocuses attention to it.

Conclusion

The Nichols Collection both provides important evidence for these points and also enables us to see how the London press developed in its most crucial formative period. Its chronological format is especially valuable as it enables us to see newspapers en bloc rather than as discrete titles.