

Advertising Novels in the Early Eighteenth-Century Newspaper: Some Examples from the Bodleian's Nichols Collection

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Various source media, 17th and 18th Century Nichols Newspapers Collection that knows every thing.



Introduction

Advertising in historical newspapers has been something of a poor relation within media studies, but early newspaper advertisements were, in fact, key components within the media economy that led to the modern news press. In eighteenth century Britain, the press could not have grown as it did without the engine of advertising. Advertisements were crucial to securing the financial viability of the newspapers of the period, and were instrumental in affording newspapers a political influence which was not directly steered by sponsors within parliament. By studying the culture of advertising, we uncover the workings of eighteenth-century news transmission. At the same time we can also look outwards from the newspapers themselves and gain insights into the everyday lives of the people of this period – into what they consumed (or were implored to consume), their desires and sorrows, their private and professional activities. In early newspapers we find all manner of goods for sale: properties, medicines, books, stationery, sherry, tobacco and so on. We find announcements of forthcoming political meetings and the comings and goings of ships carrying goods. We see advertisements for jobs wanted and positions to be filled, appeals to find lost puppies, horses and servants, and rewards promised for eloping wives. These types of texts – numbered in the millions – constitute a huge corpus of commercial notices that can help scholars across different subject areas understand how people of the early modern period lived, yearned and consumed.

¹ For the most recent comprehensive accounts of advertising in major works on the newspaper of the early modern period, see selected chapters in Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of News. How the world came to know about itself* (Yale University Press, 2014); Uriel Heyd, *Reading Newspapers: Press and public in eighteenth-century Britain and America*,

Although researchers have long recognized the importance of newspaper advertisements, systematic studies of specific genres of newspaper advertising have been scarce.¹ The lacunas in scholarly studies has until recently been related to the issue of access. Most early newspapers were, like today, published to be read and, in most cases, disposed of. Consequently, the scholar wanting to study a large bulk of advertisements in more than one or two newspapers, would have to perform the Herculean task of tracing myriad newspaper collections scattered across various libraries. However, the issue of availability has changed dramatically with the advent of digital newspaper archives, some of which are based on the collections of private citizens who felt that their daily, tri-weekly or weekly newspaper was worth keeping.

One such individual was John Nichols, whose vast collection of mainly London newspapers from the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century complements the Charles Burney collection of primarily late eighteenth-century material. Little did these two individuals know that, some hundred years later, their private collections would, in their digitized forms, offer unprecedented opportunities to cover previous gaps in scholarship.

Advertisements of books in general, and novels in particular, represent such a gap.² Out of all the early

(Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2012); Victoria M. Gardner, *The Business of News in England, 1760–1820* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

² James Raven is one of many scholars to point out the lack of scholarly attention to eighteenth-century advertisements, in his book *Publishing Business in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2014), p. 11. And in fact, only a handful of chapters and articles have

modern newspaper material now available for scrutiny through digital databases, book advertisements are among the most understudied newspaper texts. Considered as a part of the world of commerce rather than politics and culture, advertisements of the period's literature have generally not been on the radar for many scholars. This essay draws examples from the Bodleian Library's Nichols collection to present a few basic reflections on the newspaper publicity of novels in the period where the genre was established: the first decades of the eighteenth century. The essay also aims to discuss a number of methodological concerns for future scholars and students who want to explore the vast material unleashed by major digital databases.

A brief history of book advertising in the newspaper

Starting with the development of the printing press and moveable type in the fifteenth century, the advertising of books has a long and complex history. Prior to the emergence of the newspaper, early printed book advertisements came in many forms: trade cards, handbills, posters, printed circulars, single sheet flyers, title pages, booksellers' catalogues and prospectuses – all of which are important precursors to what was to become the main outlet for the marketing of books in the seventeenth-century newspaper. Importantly, the first advertisements in the earliest newspapers in Europe – printed in the Dutch Republic and later in England – were advertisement of books.

included novels in their accounts of book advertising. See James Tierney, 'Advertisements for Books in London Newspapers, 1760–1785', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 30 (2001), p. 153–164; James Tierney, 'Book Advertisements in Mid-18th-Century Newspapers: The Example of Robert Dodsley', in Robin Myers and Michael H. Harris (eds), *A Genius for Letters: Booksellers and bookselling from the 16th to the 20th century* (Winchester: St. Paul's Bibliographies, 1995), pp. 103–123; Jill Campbell, 'Domestic Intelligence: Newspaper Advertising and the Eighteenth-Century Novel', in *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 15.2 (2002), pp. 251–291.

The Nichols collection holds many examples of these seventeenth-century Mercuries, and is therefore a good place to start for scholars looking for early examples of book advertisements. Books remained the most steadily advertised items for sale in newspapers throughout the early modern period, partly due to the fact that many newspaper proprietors also operated as booksellers and were able to use their own newspapers for free marketing.

The expansion of newspaper advertising happened despite heavy government-issued taxation throughout the eighteenth century. Traders were clearly willing to pay for advertisements; printers charged advertisers a higher charge than advertising duty alone, and advertisements, in fact, provided the main income for most newspapers.³ But there were, of course, benefits for the advertisers as well: newspapers increasingly became the main, and sometimes the only, outlet for creating public awareness of a new product, including new book titles. And for the publishers, advertisements supplied publicity for specific publications, for the publisher-booksellers and their shops, and, often, for the rest of their stock. Regular newspaper advertisements enabled booksellers not only to create demand for a new publication, but also to fashion a brand in an increasingly competitive marketplace for literature.

³ The Stamp Act duty of 1712 was also an advertising duty, and meant that newspapers had to pay 1s per advertisement – a sum which increased steadily throughout the century. Merchants wanting to advertise had to pay both a printer's fee and government duty, making it considerably more expensive to advertise, as well as raising the price of the newspaper for the customers. For the most recent account on tax and advertising duties in the metropolitan and provincial press, see Victoria M. Gardner, 2016.

In the newspapers of the eighteenth century we find publicity for religious books, travel narratives, collections of poems, dramatic works, novels, political pamphlets, biographies, medical books, historical accounts, scientific accounts, and so on. In the history of book advertising there is nevertheless one genre that stands out from the rest in this period: the novel. The steady increase of newspaper advertising happened at the exact period when the novel established itself in the public consciousness, in the early decades of the eighteenth century. 'Novel and advertising grew up together', writes Jill Campbell in her article on the intersections between the rise in the novel and the growth of advertising in the eighteenth century.⁴ My own research has shown that in the period 1700–1800 almost every new novel was announced for sale in one or more newspapers.⁵ Most of these novel titles are now forgotten, whilst others are still read and appreciated as early examples of a genre which has enjoyed unprecedented popularity since the eighteenth century.

For a literary historian, the advertisements of books constitute a well of information concerning the literature of the period, the potential of which has yet to be fully tapped. As James Tierney points out, advertisements are 'mines of information about books and the book trade itself'.⁶ Book advertisements can, in fact, offer new bibliographical information about both famous and unknown books: they can, for example,

correct information about the number of editions of a book, its publication dates, the price, and the format; they can help the book historical detective to trace some of the lost books of the eighteenth century, as well as provide authorial attributions to some of the many anonymous publications of the period. In short, studying book advertisements – now finally possible through the digital databases' searchable facsimile texts – can provide the literary historian with new information which can, and undoubtedly will, have an impact on our understanding of the literature of the period.

The world's first bestseller: The advertisements of Robinson Crusoe in the Nichols collection

Because of its extensive holdings of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century newspapers, the Nichols collection contains interesting examples of the way in which the novel was advertised in its infancy.

Throughout the first decade of the century, we find numerous small notices announcing the publication of the popular novels by Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood, Penelope Aubin, Jane Barker and Mary Davis, all of which point towards the publishers' efforts at increasing public awareness of these early prose writers. In late April 1719, issues of the important London newspaper the *St James Post*, the book that is still held by many to represent the first proper English novel, is announced as published.

⁴ Campbell, 2002, p. 253.

⁵ The data of the mapping of the advertisements of novels 1700–1800 are part of my ongoing book project *Novel Advertising in Eighteenth-Century Newspapers: Marketing a Genre in Britain, Ireland and North America*. The bibliographies used for this book project are: William Harlin McBurney, *A Check List of English Prose Fiction 1700–1739* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); Jerry C. Beasley, *A Check List of Prose Fiction Published in England, 1740–1749* (Charlottesville: University

Press of Virginia, 1972); James Raven, *A Chronological Check-List of Prose Fiction Printed in Britain and Ireland* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1987), and James Raven, Antonia Forster and Stephen Bending (eds), *The English Novel 1770–1829: a Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles, vol. 1: 1770–1799* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁶ Tierney, 2001, p. 154.

The advertisement of *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, placed at the bottom of the last newspaper page, contains a meticulous titular description – today we would call it a ‘spoiler’ – where the adventures of the seafaring hero are summarised for the reader.⁷ These long and descriptive titles were common in the first decades of the eighteenth century, the exact period covered by the Nichols collection. After 1750 the titles, and therefore also the advertisements, became somewhat shorter.

Apart from a few minor changes, newspaper advertising of novels remains remarkably conventional in design, typography and content, with little difference between the early and late eighteenth-century. As James Raven has suggested, many newspaper advertisements were ‘simple but effective formulaic notices’,⁸ and it is probably this effectiveness, rather than a lack of inventiveness, which informs the conservatism of book advertising in this period. Announcements for novels share the same headings, typography and rhetorical gestures as advertisements for drama and poetry. Most book advertisements in the period are introduced with the heading seen in the example of *Robinson Crusoe*, ‘This Day is publish’d’, followed by book title, information about the name and whereabouts of the publisher-bookseller, and sometimes publicity for the rest of the stock or for books in the process of being published (‘soon will be published’). The emphasis upon newness in the heading enabled advertisements to be read as ‘news’ in their

own right, as current affairs: it entreats the newspaper reader to buy this title, *Robinson Crusoe*, fresh from the press; tomorrow the account of the sea-faring adventurer will be ‘old news’. Moreover, the phrase points to the fact that most of the advertisements of novels were announcements of new book titles. With very few exceptions – amongst them advertisements for second-hand books and auction lists – recently published titles or editions are the most frequently advertised publications in the newspapers.

Another important facet of this timeliness is, paradoxically, what they can offer in hindsight: the book historian and bibliographer will find that the advertisements give the most accurate publication date of specific novel titles. In fact, browsing a newspaper collection like the Nichols collection in a digitized form – with the possibilities this will give for searching for specific titles or author names – is likely to produce numerous bibliographical corrections regarding major and minor novels of the period. But the timeliness of the advertisements can also be misleading unless they are approached in the right way. The phrase ‘this day is published’ is only reliable for establishing a publication date when it follows an *advance* advertisement (such as ‘in a few days will be published’, ‘On Saturday April 22 will be published’ and so on), because booksellers would often use the phrase ‘this day’ ad infinitum. The Nichols collection contains numerous examples of novels puffed as fresh from the press, for weeks and sometimes months after their initial publication. Moreover, the unusual chronology of the collection – with newspapers collected and bound according to

⁷ *The St. James Post*, April 22–24, 1719.

⁸ James Raven, *Judging New Wealth: Popular Publishing and Responses to Commerce in England, 1750–1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 102.

publication date rather than newspaper title – makes it extra convenient for getting an idea of which of the collected newspapers advertised a specific novel title in a specific month of a specific year.

Another aspect of book advertising that remained consistent throughout the period is the juxtaposition of notices of books with advertisements of products that we think of as fundamentally different from books, such as comestibles, properties and medicines.

For example, in one of the newspapers held in the Nichols collection, *The London Post* of 1704, we find an advertisement for *The London Spy* 'Printed and Sold by Benj. Harris, at the Golden-Boar's-Head in Grace-Church-Street'.⁹ Beside the notice for the book is an advertisement for a 'Syrupus Balsamicus', 'prepared chiefly against COUGHS and COLDS'. The advertisement of this syrup is much more elaborate than the publicity for the book in question, describing as it does the way in which the syrup – probably an eighteenth-century example of what is today known as a quack medicine – 'opens all Obstructions in Breathing', and that the medicine 'loosens the Cold Flegmatick, Ticklish Humour in the Stomach'. As interesting as the meticulous description of the use and the potential users (for adults as well as 'Children that have a dry, wasting Hooping Husking Cough'), is the small piece of information given at the bottom of the advertisement: the Syrup is 'sold by Benj. Harris, at the Golden-Boar's-Head in Grace-Church-Street'. As this example shows, booksellers were often vendors of drugs and medicines as well as books, and they had to

combine products to survive in an increasingly competitive market for books and other goods.

Directly above the book advertisement we find an even longer advertisement of a run-away Welshman, Edward Evans, 'by trade a Printer, and works in the Press only'. The meticulous and pejorative description of this printer ('tall of Stature, Raw- Bon'd ... having a Nose like a Negro, Stammering very much in his Speech ... very Illiterate and Impudent in his Conversation') is indicative of the confidence in the period that such notices could be effective in procuring the person in question. Equally interesting for us, again, is the information at the bottom of the advertisement: the 'master' of Edward Evans is none other than Benjamin Harris, who promises a generous sum of 10 shillings for 'Whoever secures the said Run-away'.

Thus, newspaper advertisements can provide crucial information about the heterogeneous operations of booksellers of the period as well as their business, the whereabouts of their shops and their methods of distribution. Benjamin Harris (b.1673) was a newspaper printer and bookseller who operated in London, and for some years also in America. And indeed, the *signalement* of the run-away printer echoes a genre of advertisements common in American newspapers: the runaway slave advertisement. The meticulously detailed descriptions of physical appearance, gender and age of the runaways has provided historians with biographical source material about individual slaves from this period. It has been important for shattering a remarkably longstanding historical prejudice that the African slaves were submissive and content to be

⁹ *The London Post*, March 6–8, 1704.

unfree – and it thus highlights how advertisements can change the perception of important historical and political issues.

The advantages of digitized historic newspaper research and the limitations of the archives: Some suggestions and warnings for scholars

How can the mining of eighteenth-century newspapers provide new knowledge concerning books of the period? In what ways do the worlds of literature, news production and commerce intersect in the Enlightenment period? Any efforts to search for comprehensive answers to the above research questions would have been futile just a few years ago, and the fact that these databases are giving researchers an opportunity rigorously to explore such questions is exciting – and quite daunting. For whilst the new resources present us with opportunities for gathering mass data as well as searching for specific information, there is still a long way to go in terms of developing scholarly methods for approaching the material. There are many potential pitfalls in the meeting between man and machine, particularly in the intersection between the new medium and the old texts. One problem is the extreme accessibility itself: information can be accessed as ‘gobbits’ – as decontextualised units of data, the route to which is ‘denaturalised,’ in that the access requires no grappling with an original context, either textual or historical.

The brief examples presented above suggest some of the scholarly findings on offer for literary scholars researching early modern newspapers. Tracing the

advertisement of a book through the new, digitised newspapers’ archives can show us how a novel was first presented to a contemporary audience; it can provide valuable bibliographical information about previously unknown authors and editions; it can give new knowledge concerning prices and formats of books, and procure knowledge about the publishers and booksellers of the period. Such findings will, however, be of little importance unless we also acknowledge the ongoing importance of studying news publications within their historical context. Any study of book advertisements must take into consideration the whole historical apparatus behind the business of newspapers and bookselling; the political, social and economic context as well as the distributional side of this developing industry. Some of the last cited examples also show the advantage of *browsing* a whole page of a newspaper rather than fixing one’s eye solely to the texts one is searching for: scholars looking for advertisements of *The London Spy* would easily miss out on the interesting juxtaposition between different advertisements and news accounts on the same page if they did not take the time to zoom out’ of the specific text. The important negotiation between the method of searching and browsing is just one of many methodological negotiations at stake for future scholars. Nevertheless, the coming years and decades will undoubtedly see an increase in important research on different aspects of early modern newspapers, and the Nichols collection will be an excellent place for scholars to start.

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