17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} Century Nichols Newspapers Collection
Interview with the Digital Product Editor at Gale
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Who was John Nichols?
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John Nichols was a leading London printer of the second half of the 18th century. He printed many significant books and also printed, edited and wrote for the Gentleman’s Magazine, itself a landmark periodical publication.

As an author, his main interests were literature and history, and he is still acclaimed today for his Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century and his History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester, among other works.
How did he come to own such a large quantity of newspapers?
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Nichols actively collected newspapers as research material for his writing. The newspapers in today’s Nichols collection are not contemporary papers that Nichols saved after reading them: the oldest paper in the collection pre-dates Nichols’s birth. Instead, these are earlier newspapers that were purchased from other people, for example at the liquidation of someone’s estate. Early on, his friend John Wilkes also donated his collection to him.

The Nichols newspaper collection that we see now in the Bodleian Library is in fact only a fraction of the collection Nichols assembled. Some newspapers were lost in a fire, others were stolen by a servant and after Nichols’s death, still others were sold by his heirs.
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The remainder of the Nichols collection was with his son, John Bowyer Nichols, and after his death this collection was sold to the Bodleian Library in 1865. It is interesting to note that John Nichols himself had offered to sell his collection of newspapers to the British Museum in 1812. Unfortunately, at the time they were only interested in some papers, and Nichols chose to keep the large collection intact rather than sell it off in pieces.
In what condition are the papers in now?
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They are in excellent condition overall. The newspapers are collected in 296 volumes where they are bound chronologically. They are not arranged by publication title, but strictly by date. The excellent state of preservation of the collection means that the digital images are also of excellent quality, which provides a good reading experience as well as good Optical Character Recognition (OCR) results.
What sort of material is included in this collection?
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The collection mainly contains newspapers printed in London between 1672 and January 1738. There are also a handful of provincial publications, so in total there are over 250 publications represented. Added to that, we have a number of pamphlets and broadsheets, especially in the earlier period covered by the collection.

Of course, when we talk about newspapers here, we are talking about a different type of publication from today’s newspapers. For one thing, some publications are better described as magazine-like: they included little or no news and addressed a variety of subjects such as religion, philosophy, the arts or trigonometry, among others. Other papers were really opinion papers, produced to publicise the political opinions of their writers.
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Vigorous debates and arguments were fought between opposing newspapers, polarized along political and/or religious lines. But for the most part, the papers in this collection did report news, especially foreign news, as this was usually not subject to so much censorship. Over time, one can see the news diversify and expand to more domestic matters, in particular branching into commercial and financial topics. Daily news was still not common however, and most newspapers were either weekly, bi-weekly or tri-weekly publications.
What was the publishing scene at the time they were produced?
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The date span covered in the Nichols newspaper collection coincides with the height in popularity of coffeehouses in London. Men used to gather in coffeehouses to enjoy the newly available drink and to socialize, debate and gossip. Coffeehouses provided the newspapers that fuelled those conversations and thereby secured a stable customer base for the newspapers, alongside individual subscribers.

The backdrop for this period was the thirst for knowledge already stimulated by the active book trade and the battle for freedom of speech. The period covered by the collection includes the time of the Licensing Act when printing was under tight Parliamentary supervision (see *City Mercury* #3 “With allowance. Roger L’Estrange”, who was the appointed Licenser at that time) until 1695. With the lapsing of the Licensing Act and the relative new freedom came a great number of new publications, for example *The Flying Post* and *The Post Boy*. 
What was the publishing scene at the time they were produced?

Later limitations on the press came via taxation. The Stamp Duty on newspapers appeared in 1712, pushing up prices and leading to the disappearance of many publications. Newspaper sheets had to be stamped at the Head Office at Somerset House before printing. These stamps can be seen on newspapers of that period in the collection.

Of course, with tax came “tax avoidance”, and newspaper formats evolved in a bid to escape or minimize taxation, which was dependent on paper size and the number of pages. For example, the Stamp Act was passed on 1 August 1712 and the first stamp in this collection is found on *The Post Boy*, August 2, 1712. However, *The British Mercury* of 9 August has no stamp, and this is because the paper is eight pages long and therefore qualified as a pamphlet, incurring a different, lower tax. Before the Stamp Act *The British Mercury* issues were two pages long (see 30th July 1712 issue, for example).
What was the publishing scene at the time they were produced?

A side effect of expanding newspaper size was the proliferation of large, ornate mastheads that helped fill space, as can be seen in *Weekly Remarks*, 2 March 1716, and many others. Finally, in 1725, the Stamp Act was revised to cover the longer newspapers, and these subsequently returned to pre-tax formats. Heavier tax, of course put a strain on the commercial viability of newspapers so that they became more dependent upon subsidies from political parties.
What are some of the flagship titles and why are they important?
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In chronological order we start with *The London Gazette*, a twice-weekly, government publication that was first named the *Oxford Gazette*, as this is where the government was based at the time of its launch in 1665. The first issue in this collection is dated 1678. This publication can be seen as the first English newspaper as we think of them now, both in terms of contents and format. It is also the oldest continuously-published newspaper in the United Kingdom, and still publishes government notices every day.

We can also mention *The Athenian Mercury*, a precursor of the modern magazine. It was established in 1691 and was published twice a week, with the intention of answering “the most nice and curious questions propos'd by the ingenious”. It provided miscellaneous information on a wide variety of subjects, in a question-and-answer format.
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Later on in the collection we can also find *The Post Boy*, *The Post Man or the Historical Account* and *The Flying Post or Postmaster*. These are publications born out of the lapsing of the Licensing Act and were to dominate the news press for many years. They were published three times a week, on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. When the Stamp Act came into place in 1712 and made newspapers more expensive, this frequency was ideal to provide current news to an avid audience but was easier to sustain than daily publication.

Finally, we should mention *The Tatler*, later followed by *The Spectator*. Started in 1709, *The Tatler* developed the format of essays to relate and discuss current affairs. This style was subsequently adopted by many more newspapers, typically polarized politically, such as *The Examiner*, *The Whig Examiner*, *The Medley*, *The Original Weekly Journal*, the *Weekly Journal or Saturday's Post*, etc.
What’s the most significant thing about the collection?
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In my opinion, the most significant thing is that they exist at all. Most of these early English newspapers have otherwise been lost, so the Nichols collection, alongside that of Charles Burney, represents a unique resource for studying the news and print culture of the period.
How does this digitised version compare to the existing microfilm collections currently available?
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There is no microfilm archive of the Nichols collection as such. Whilst the *Early English Newspapers* microfilm collection released in 1978 did include publications from the Nichols collection, it did not include the entire collection. Content from the Nichols collection was used to fill gaps in runs of newspapers in the Burney collection. The *17th and 18th Century Nichols Newspaper Collection* contains, for the first time, the full Nichols collection archive in digitised format.
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These newspapers were clearly collected for the information they hold, not just as collectable items. Nichols used them for his own research and also lent them to others. Earlier owners had done the same, as the archives were always intended as a usable resource. So, throughout the collection we find various marks, underlining and hand-written annotations. The inside covers of some of the volumes have written lists of items of interest to be found inside.
What have been some of the challenges of digitising the archive?
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The biggest difficulty was the absence of a detailed catalogue. There have been attempts at cataloguing the collection before of course, but it appears that there was no definitive detailed record of all the items included.
Who do you expect will be particularly interested in using the Nichols digital archive?
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Anyone studying the late 17th-18th Century will find valuable material in this collection. Topics addressed in the publications are wide ranging, and include foreign news, diplomacy and reports on wars. On the domestic side, we find material on politics and religion as well as commerce, finance, legislation, entertainment, the arts, London life, horse races and various ‘medicines’ to name a few.

The *17th and 18th Century Nichols Newspaper Collection* is a valuable research tool on these subjects by itself, or in combination with other existing collections, such as the *17th and 18th Century Burney Newspapers Collection*, which covers the same period but holds many different titles and issues. Many documents in the Nichols collection are not found in the Burney collection and therefore constitute an essential complement to that other major newspaper collection.
To find out more about the archive, including the history of the collection and notable titles, visit

www.gale.com/explorenichols
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