

The Newspapers of Provincial America

CHARLES E. CLARK

THIS EVENING a single number of a single newspaper, of which so far as anyone knows a single copy remains, is intended to be very much on our minds. That of course is Benjamin Harris's *Publick Occurrences*, which made its sole appearance approximately forty miles east of here exactly 300 years ago today. Whether or not this famous but little-read journal actually possesses quite the significance that is usually attached to it, the tercentenary of its appearance will generally be taken also, as it is taken for granted by those of us who are a part of this project, as the tercentenary of newspaper publishing in British America. Only those who relish quibbling will object.

Now there are indeed grounds for quibbling, especially if you want to be churlish about it. You could point out, for example, that Harris failed to produce even one successive number after the first. You could go on to notice, with a superior air, that *Publick Occurrences* was not really the first use of an Anglo-American printing press to publish news of current events. If you wanted to register earnestness rather than superciliousness, you could argue that to honor Harris as the founder of American newspaper publishing is to detract from the much more substantial achievement of John Campbell, who in 1704 founded the first successful American

This was the first lecture in the series 'Three Hundred Years of the American Newspaper' held at the Society in the fall. The program was made possible by a grant from the Gannett Foundation. The essay appears here as prepared for oral delivery.

CHARLES E. CLARK is professor of history and the humanities at the University of New Hampshire.

Copyright © 1991 by American Antiquarian Society.

newspaper, the exceptionally long-lived *Boston News-Letter*. Fortunately for us who gather here tonight, however, and fortunately for our exhibit and lecture series, such objections will not deter us or anyone else who cares to do so from using the occasion to celebrate the American newspaper—certainly not to the extent of delaying the celebration until 2004.

My own role in the celebration is to try to interpret the adoption and subsequent development of the newspaper genre in the British American colonies. Like all things ‘colonial’ or ‘provincial,’ the American newspaper in its earliest stages cannot be understood apart from the metropolitan models upon which it was based. My first job, therefore, is to try to deal briefly but sensibly with the several contexts in which the first American attempts at newspaper publishing took place. The colonial newspaper, however, was not a static institution, at least after 1719, when John Campbell experienced his first competition. The 1720s and 1730s were decades of experimentation in sponsorship, format, and content. My second job is to hastily describe this process of experimentation, which resulted in great variety among American newspapers for a brief period but which, like the founding stage, was carried out with great self-consciousness about the relationship between American publishing and the metropolitan original. By the 1740s, this period of experimentation was over. American newspaper publishing had settled into a stage of standardization in sponsorship, procedures, and product that on several counts can be described as at once more ‘anglicized’ and more distinctly ‘American’ than its predecessors. My final job is to try to discuss the relationship between the newspapers, mainly in this mature stage, and American provincial culture, and to suggest ways of answering the question whether the newspapers of the period made any difference.

CONTEXTS

First, the contexts: British and American. To save time, I am going to ignore all of English history before the Restoration except to notice that printed news and opinion circulated during much of

the seventeenth century. Generally, however, and this was especially true during the Civil War when printed reports of this kind were used by both sides as propaganda, they appeared in the form of irregularly produced pamphlets called 'news books' rather than in what we would recognize as newspaper format. From 1662 until 1694, except for a six-year lapse between 1679 and 1685, a Parliamentary act provided for strict governmental controls over printing. It limited the number of printing presses that could operate in the realm and required prior licensing of all printed materials. Beginning in 1665, the instrument adopted by the Crown to exercise its monopoly on printed news and information was the *London Gazette*, a twice-weekly, two-page news sheet, in which we recognize in its periodicity, format, and content the essential characteristics of a newspaper.¹ After the final lapse of the Printing Act in 1694, private publishers in London rushed to imitate the *Gazette* by publishing newspapers on the same pattern on their own account.² By 1712, London had about twenty newspaper titles. Provincial printers and publishers on both sides of the Atlantic did not lag far behind. The first English provincial newspaper of which we can be certain was the *Norwich Post*, started in 1701, and the second the *Bristol Post-Boy*, begun in 1702. By 1712, a dozen weekly English newspapers were being published outside of London.³

If you've been following the chronology of all of this, you will

1. The *Gazette* actually began as the *Oxford Gazette*, since the plague of 1665 had driven the Court to the university city, where it was in residence on November 16, 1665, the date of the *Gazette's* first number. With the twenty-fourth number, February 5, 1666, the location and title changed permanently to *London Gazette*. For the founding of the *Gazette* and other aspects of the regulation of printing and the official monopoly on the news, see Fredrick Seaton Siebert, *Freedom of the Press in England, 1476-1776* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), pp. 289-95. Peter Fraser's *The Intelligence of the Secretaries of State and Their Monopoly of Licensed News, 1660-1688* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956) and P. M. Handover's *A History of the London Gazette* (London: H.M.S.O., 1965) are also relevant to this topic.

2. H.R. Fox Bourne, *English Newspapers: Chapters in the History of Journalism*, 2 vols., (London: Chatto and Windus, 1887), 1: 55-57.

3. G. A. Cranfield, *The Development of the Provincial Newspaper, 1700-1760* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 12, 16; G.A. Cranfield, *A Hand-List of English Provincial Newspapers and Periodicals, 1700-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p. 7; R. M. Wiles, *Freshest Advices: Early Provincial Newspapers in England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1965), app. C, p. 413.

have noticed that Benjamin Harris's attempt to begin a newspaper in Boston in 1690 was precocious, pretentious, and startling. Small wonder that it didn't work. Who was this extraordinary character, anyway? And what is the explanation for the cluster of events I'll call the *Publick Occurrences* episode?

For most of his career, Benjamin Harris was a printer, bookseller, and irrepressible political polemicist in London. His sojourn in Boston was a relatively brief one, just under a decade. It coincided almost exactly with the final revival of the Printing Act, 1685–95. He came essentially as a refugee from James II, whose accession in 1685 was ominous both for Whig journalists such as Harris on his side of the water, and for hotbeds of religious dissent and casual attitudes toward imperial authority such as Massachusetts on this side. For Harris's part, he had to face the reinstatement of the Printing Act, which he violated several times by publishing an illegal party newspaper, and finally stood in the pillory and spent time in jail for publishing a seditious pamphlet.⁴

As for Massachusetts, which had already lost its charter in the last year of Charles II, the accession of James brought Sir Edmund Andros and the Dominion of New England. Nevertheless, it was Boston to which Harris chose to flee once he was released from prison in 1686. There he set up shop as a publisher, introduced Boston to a provincial version of the coffeehouse culture of London by establishing the London Coffee House, and engaged the two printers of the town to print a few books and an almanac. His peak year for productivity as publisher and bookseller came in 1690, the year not only of *Publick Occurrences* but also of a more influential and long-lived Harris publication by far, the first edition of *The New-England Primer*, which Richard Pierce printed for Harris as well as the famous newspaper. In the next year, Harris's Boston fortunes improved even more when he established a printing partnership with John Allen, another refugee from London. Despite his rapidly growing prosperity in this provincial town,

4. Siebert, *Freedom of the Press in England*, pp. 269n., 271n., 297–98.

Harris returned in 1695 to a freer London than the one he had left nearly a decade before and published newspapers—this time legally.⁵ His *Intelligence, Domestic and Foreign*, was in fact the second newspaper to appear in London after the final expiration of the Printing Act.⁶

As fascinating and bold a figure as Harris was, however, it was not really he who introduced to Boston the idea of printing current events. During the first half-century of printing in Massachusetts, the great bulk of the output had consisted of pieces commissioned to serve the formal ends of church, state, or college. These of course included some of the earliest book-length productions of the American press, and there had long been established a tradition of publishing a special kind of periodical, the almanac. Much more numerous than either of these were more ephemeral publications such as broadside notices, gubernatorial proclamations, legislative resolutions, a very few private advertisements and announcements, and the annual list of Harvard graduates. There were also plenty of printed sermons, although not as many as in the century to come.

The first break away from all these conventional genres came at the hands of Samuel Green, Jr. In mid-April 1685, he printed a broadside of an entirely new kind—a reprint of the *London Gazette* of the previous February 9 that reported the death of Charles II and what was for Bostonians (as well as for Harris) the portentous news of the accession of James.⁷ For the first time, a provincial printer (in England or America) had used his press to relate recent public events of consequence to his readers. From that time on, the productions of the Boston press included occasional broadside reports of world events and domestic intelligence as well, such as

5. See Benjamin Franklin V, ed., *Boston Printers, Publishers, and Booksellers, 1640-1800* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), pp. 277-81, 412-14.

6. Bourne, *English Newspapers*, 1: 55-57.

7. The *Gazette* (dated February 5-9, 1684, o.s.) from which Green's copy was made must have arrived in the ship reported by Samuel Sewall on April 14. He mentions arrival of the news and 'a couple of printed Proclamations relating to that affair' on that ship, but not the *Gazette* specifically. *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729*, ed. M. Halsey Thomas, 2 vols. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1973), 1: 60.

'A Relation of Captain Bull, Concerning the Mohawks of Fort-Albany,' which Samuel Green, Jr., printed in 1689.⁸

In the spring of that same momentous year, the rebellion against Andros stimulated a flurry of publications from Green's press in the form of both pamphlets and broadsides. Late in the year came another breakthrough in the rapidly developing printing history of Boston. Combining two letters from Increase Mather in England with an excerpt from a London publication imperfectly identified as 'the public News-Letter' (probably the *Gazette*), Green produced a newspaper-like broadside entitled *The Present State of the New-English Affairs*.⁹

This was a one-time publication, undated and without serial number. But in its appearance and format it duplicated the *London Gazette*, with its centered title at the top of the page, its two columns, and even a ruled line in small gothic under the title, reading, 'This is Published to prevent false Reports', in place of the *Gazette's* date. All three items, the first from a letter from Mather to Gov. Simon Bradstreet dated September 3, the second a newspaper extract dated July 6, and the third a part of a letter from Mather to his son Cotton, dated September 2, concerned the progress of Mather's attempt to get a new Massachusetts charter approved by Parliament and Mather's appearance before the king.

Whether *New-English Affairs* was printed with official sanction by Green on his own account or commissioned by another, such as the governor or perhaps Cotton Mather, the record does not reveal. What had happened here, however, was the adaptation of

8. This information is based on the chronologically arranged broadside shelflist at the American Antiquarian Society.

9. Although Clarence S. Brigham lists *The Present State of the New-English Affairs* in his *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers, 1690-1820*, 2 vols. (1947; repr. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), he notes that bibliographers consider it a 'broadside' rather than a 'newspaper.' By most definitions, of course, newspapers are serial publications and *New-English Affairs* clearly was not, nor was it, like *Publick Occurrences*, intended to be. Brigham places its probable publication in November 1689, based on an assumed lapse of about two months between September 5, the latest date on one of its items, and its appearance in Boston print. Michael G. Hall, in *The Last American Puritan: The Life of Increase Mather, 1639-1723* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), p. 229, says the broadside came out 'that winter.' *The Present State* is reproduced in W. H. Whitmore, ed., *The Andros Tracts*, 3 vols. (1868-74; repr. New York: Burt Franklin, n.d.), 2: 15-18.

the concept and form of the *Gazette* to the presentation under a local title of a collection of European intelligence, all with a specific bearing upon local interests—and upon the personal reputation, it might be added, of Increase Mather.

When *New-English Affairs* appeared on the scene, Benjamin Harris had been in Boston for three years. To Green's use of print to report the news, Harris, who you will remember was an experienced former publisher, next applied the principle of periodicity with which he was well familiar from his tumultuous career in London. Compared, however, to the imaginative leap that had produced Green's important news broadside, the idea of issuing such a publication serially was only a short and rather obvious step. Less than a year later, in any case, by which time Samuel Green had died in the smallpox epidemic of 1690, Harris engaged Pierce to print the three-page sheet that has been long and widely celebrated as the first American newspaper.¹⁰

Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick, issued on September 25, 1690, differed from *New-English Affairs* in the one vital respect that its publisher intended 'Numb. 1' to be the first in a series. The paper was to be '*furnished once a month (or if any Glut of Occurrences happen, oftener)*.' It also differed from its broadside predecessor and its first newspaper successors in its emphasis upon American rather than European news and in its publisher's striking, indeed cavalier, disregard of the province government's claim of authority over the press. But of course such behavior was nothing new for Benjamin Harris. Both of these differences contributed to the paper's swift demise; 'Numb. 1' never had a sequel.

To a modern reader's eye, *Publick Occurrences* is a much more engaging publication than most of the provincial newspapers, English or American, that appeared in the two or three decades after 1700. It is, in the first place, printed legibly and neatly, a tribute more perhaps to Pierce's craftsmanship than to Harris's editorial supervision. The writing is also original and lively by

10. Franklin, *Boston Printers, Publishers, and Booksellers*, p. 236.

comparison with anything that appeared in America before the *New-England Courant* in 1721, and the topics are drawn overwhelmingly from local surroundings—a Thanksgiving observance by Christian Indians, the state of the harvest, news of the American theater in King William's War, then in progress, 'Fevers and Agues . . . in some parts of the Country,' the abatement of the Boston smallpox epidemic, two disastrous fires in Boston. 'Intelligence' from the West Indies, France, and Ireland, mostly in the form of war news, is printed on the third and last page, not at the beginning of the paper, as standard practice would soon be dictating, and is taken not from English newspapers, as would be the case with later American newspapers, but from a private letter recently arrived at Portsmouth in a ship from Barbados. Harris, obviously, unlike the postmaster-publishers of Boston who would succeed him a decade and a half and more later, was collecting news and gossip at his London Coffee House in Boston (where, according to its colophon, the paper was published) in much the same way he would have done it in London. One result is that *Publick Occurrences* carried much more news of the American scene than was common in the colonial press for fifty years after that. *Publick Occurrences*, like *New-English Affairs*, really had a different underlying purpose than its eighteenth-century successors, which, during at least the first several decades of their history, were designed primarily to involve their American readership in the affairs of Europe. Harris intended primarily to save Bostonians during an exceptionally critical time from rumors and 'False Reports' of the events and affairs, especially the martial affairs, of their own province.

Why was *Publick Occurrences* suppressed? Listen to the order of Governor Bradstreet and his council and decide for yourself:

WHEREAS some have lately presumed to Print and Disperse a Pamphlet Entitled, Public Occurrences, both Forreign and Domestick . . . Without the least Privity or Countenance of Authority.

The Governour and council having had the perusal of the said Pamphlet, and finding that therein is contained Reflections of a very high nature: As also sundry doubtful and uncertain Reports, do hereby

manifest and declare their high Resentment and Disallowance of said Pamphlet, and Order that the same be Suppressed and called in; strictly forbidding any person or persons for the future to Set forth any thing in Print without License first obtained from those that are or shall be appointed by the Government to grant the same.

Almost everyone who has written on the subject stresses something different in the order and something different about the content that might have inspired the 'high resentment' of the governor and council. Most often cited is Harris's criticisms on the inside pages of the *Iroquois Indians*, ostensibly allies of the English against the French. First suggesting, in the course of a long description of a two-pronged English expedition against Canada, that the Mohawks were reluctant to join in as promised, he went on to express gratitude that Canada might in fact be taken 'without the assistance of those miserable Salvages, in whom we have too much confided.' The officials may also have been offended by a report Harris published that part of the reason for domestic unrest in France stemmed from the dauphin's resentment that Louis XIV '*used to lie with the Sons Wife.*'¹¹

Clearly, the paper was suppressed not simply because it had not been licensed. Equally clearly, however, the provincial executive branch assumed the inherent right of government to control the press, even without specific mention of the Printing Act that was still in effect in England but which could not have been applied by the mechanisms of government in Massachusetts except by analogy.

What has to be borne in mind by those of us with twentieth-century assumptions is that neither the legal nor intellectual tradition of England yet contained any conclusive elements upholding 'freedom of press' as a positive good. Soon the practice of prior restraint would be abandoned in England, but not the common-law concept of 'seditious libel,' which made any publisher of defamatory remarks about public officials or government, true or

11. *Publick Occurrences*, September 25, 1690. I have used the American Antiquarian Society facsimile of the only known surviving copy in the Public Records Office, London.

false, susceptible to punishment, even in certain cases punishment for treason.

With respect to the immediate circumstances of the *Publick Occurrences* episode, we should also bear in mind that these were dangerous and uncertain times. The local rebellion against Andros had occurred only seventeen months before, upon receipt of the news of the Glorious Revolution. The eighty-seven-year-old Bradstreet headed what was, in effect, a revolutionary government, as yet unconfirmed by the new monarchs. The new charter and the appointment of Sir William Phips as first royal governor was still a year in the future. To make matters all the more tenuous, war with France had broken out in 1689, and the first raids on the New England frontier had already taken place. These circumstances, naturally, are what led Harris to feed the community's obvious thirst for news and information, but they are also what had led the Assembly late in the previous year to pass an act threatening severe punishment for any who continued to publish the 'many papers . . . lately printed & dispersed tending to the disturbance of the peace & subuersion of the govermt.'¹² And of course they were the same frightening circumstances that made it impossible for Bradstreet and his council to condone a potentially disturbing publication like *Publick Occurrences*.

That was the end for the time being of newspaper publication in Boston but not of the use of the printing press to publish the news—an English naval victory over the French in 1692, an earthquake in Naples in 1694, an entire *London Gazette* of 1700 containing news of the new king of Spain and the coronation of a pope. In 1698, Bartholomew Green and John Allen even reprinted a human-interest article from the *Monthly Mercury* of London entitled 'The Turkish Fast.'¹³ At the same time, the postmaster of

12. Clyde A. Duniway, *The Development of Freedom of the Press in Massachusetts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1906), pp. 67–68. Duniway has long provided the most comprehensive account of the *Publick Occurrences* episode, but there is a quick and useful summary in Ian K. Steele, *The English Atlantic, 1675–1740: An Exploration of Communication and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 145–47.

13. See again the broadside shelflist at the American Antiquarian Society. Reference to

Boston, a bookseller named Duncan Campbell, was exchanging news of Europe and the colonies by handwritten newsletter with at least one and probably other correspondents elsewhere in America.¹⁴

Quite obviously, Boston and its sister colonial capitals had developed a thirst for news. As for how this commodity could be systematically and profitably collected and dispersed, all of the necessary examples had been set and most of the necessary lessons learned. It remained only for a successful pioneer to do the job.

The pioneer turned out to be Duncan Campbell's son John, who succeeded to the Boston postmastership on the death of his father in 1702.¹⁵ He and the several postmasters who succeeded him took up newspaper publishing as an extension, as they saw it, of their official duties. John Campbell continued the exchange of written newsletters that his father had begun, a practice that may have had some bearing on his decision to undertake the function of 'gazetteer' of Massachusetts. His real example, however, was the *London Gazette*, which served as model for his *Boston News-Letter* in every way. Not only did Campbell copy most of the contents of his paper verbatim out of the London press, primarily the *Gazette*, but he copied the format and arrangement of the *Gazette* exactly, right down to the phrase 'Published by Authority' at the top of the paper.

By the standards of almost all of Campbell's eventual competitors and successors, the *News-Letter* was prosaic and dull. His intent, clearly, was to add modestly to the profits of the post office

the reprinting of the *Gazette* of December 2, 1700, of which there is apparently no extant copy, appears in *The Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 1: 446.

14. The evidence for this activity of Campbell, his predecessor, and his son John Campbell, founder of the *Boston News-Letter*, consists of a collection of twenty-one newsletters from 1666 to 1703 in the Massachusetts Historical Society. The collection has now been separated and dispersed among other papers in the society's holdings, but it is printed in two volumes of the *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 9 (1866-67): 485-501, and 12 (1871-75): 419-27.

15. The record on Campbell is vague. Of the many secondary sources that mention John Campbell, only a few identify him as the son of Duncan. One is Franklin's *Boston Printers, Publishers, and Booksellers*, p. 70, perhaps on the basis of Isaiah Thomas's 'probably' in the *History of Printing* (p. 188). On the strength of all that is known about the two men, the assumption that Duncan and John were father and son seems to me both obvious and safe.

by enabling a small cadre of readers in Boston and elsewhere—his circulation, by his own account, amounted to about 250 copies at first—to share the public information from Europe that up to then had been available only to the privileged few who could afford a London newspaper subscription, had private correspondents in England, or who were members of select circles (such as the governor's council) that received and discussed such information through official channels. The paper was thus intended, he repeated many times in print in an everlastingly futile quest for greater 'encouragement,' as a 'publick good.' His method was simply to copy swaths of European news from the London papers, usually the *Gazette*, making sure to relate all items in chronological order so as to construct from week to week a 'thread of occurrences.' This systematic record of European events, which is how he conceived it, was supplemented by brief announcements and news snippets from the governor or his secretary, occasional shipping lists, public notices, and a small amount of paid advertising.

The *News-Letter* was never a financial success, and when Campbell was confronted with competition from the *Boston Gazette* in 1719 and the *New-England Courant* in the 1720s, he became flustered and ineffective as a rival. Nevertheless, he continued the paper after his removal from the postmastership in 1719 until, at age seventy, he turned it over to his printer Bartholomew Green in 1723.

EXPERIMENTATION

John Campbell held a monopoly on publishing printed news in America for fifteen years. By what was probably a coincidence, William Brooker's *Boston Gazette* and the Philadelphia printer Andrew Bradford's *American Weekly Mercury* appeared just one day apart in 1719, on December 21 and December 22, respectively. The next twenty years, during which twelve more newspapers were begun in the continental colonies (and two more in the British West Indies), were a period of experimentation in sponsorship, function, and content. The experimentation is most con-

spicuous in Boston, in part because of its early preeminence among American seaports in population and political importance and in part because of its high density of printers. Of the fifteen newspapers begun in the continental colonies between 1704 and 1740, six were begun in Boston; of the twelve remaining in 1740, five were in Boston. New York and Philadelphia each had two; Williamsburg, Charleston, and Germantown, Pennsylvania, had one each.¹⁶

One kind of experimentation was in sponsorship.¹⁷ Most of us think of the newspapers of colonial America as having been owned and published by their printers. This was indeed mostly true after about 1730 and entirely true after 1754. In Boston, however, newspaper publishing did not start that way. John Campbell was a postmaster and not a printer. All of the first five publishers of the *Boston Gazette*, Campbell's first competitor, were postmasters and not printers.¹⁸ When the last of these postmaster-publishers, John Boydell, lost his office in 1734, he kept the *Gazette*, but the new postmaster, Ellis Huske, started a newspaper of his own, the *Boston Weekly Post-Boy*, which continued as a postmaster-owned newspaper until it was discontinued in December 1754, shortly before Huske's death and long after every other newspaper in America was owned by its printer.

Another form of sponsorship, also unique to Boston, was the literary club. Technically, the printer James Franklin was publisher

16. The handiest source for figures such as these is Edward Connery Lathem, *Chronological Tables of American Newspapers, 1690-1820* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1972). For newspapers published between 1704 and 1740, see the tables on pages 2-5 in Lathem's work.

17. General observations about the newspapers that are named in the several paragraphs that follow are based on a systematic examination of the relevant newspaper files, some original and some photocopied, in the American Antiquarian Society. Identification of publishers and printers is in most cases evident from the publication data included in the newspaper, but the most important supplementary source, which I have used freely, is Isaiah Thomas, *History of Printing in America*, 2d ed., ed. Marcus A. McCorison (New York: Imprint Society, 1970). For Boston postmasters, see Carl Wilhelm Ernst, *Postal Service in Boston, 1639-1893* (Boston: Trustees of the Boston Public Library, 1975). This is reprinted, with a foreword by John Alden, from *The Professional and Industrial History of Suffolk County, Massachusetts*, 3 vols. (Boston: Boston History Company, 1894), 2: 443-504.

18. William Brooker, Philip Musgrave, Thomas Lewis, Henry Marshall, and John Boydell.

of the *New-England Courant*, which was founded in 1721 to oppose smallpox inoculation and most other things the Mathers stood for and went on during its brief but sensational career to become the vehicle of some of America's earliest literary journalism. Technically, too, the printers Samuel Kneeland and Timothy Green published the *New-England Weekly Journal*, which began as another literary newspaper in 1727, not long after the *Courant* died. The real sponsors in the first case, however, were a club of writers and controversialists called the 'Couranteers,' of whom Franklin was but one member. In the second case, it was not the printers but a trio of establishment-oriented writers who supplied much of the content and apparently made most of the editorial decisions. The chief contributor was twenty-year-old Mather Byles, a nephew of Cotton Mather and future minister and noted Loyalist, who at that point in his life desired above all to be a poet. A third Boston literary newspaper, the *Weekly Rehearsal*, was actually owned by an aspiring writer, Jeremiah Gridley (eventually the attorney general of the province but then a schoolteacher), who hired John Draper to do the printing when the enterprise started in 1731. The next year, Gridley switched printers from Draper to Thomas Fleet, who eventually acquired it outright and in 1735 changed its title to the *Boston Evening-Post*.

Yet a third kind of sponsorship, one that would emerge again during the era of vicious personal politics early in the new republic, was sponsorship by political faction. The only true example of this sort in provincial America was the *New-York Weekly Journal*, printed by John Peter Zenger, beginning in 1733, specifically as a vehicle for the political writings of the faction headed by Chief Justice Lewis Morris and opposed to Gov. William Cosby. The paper was edited not by its printer but by James Alexander, one of Morris's closest allies. Zenger, in short, printed the *Weekly Journal* on much the same terms, and for the same sponsors, that he printed political pamphlets.¹⁹

19. See Michael G. Kammen, *Colonial New York—A History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), p. 206; Stephen Botein, 'Mr. Zenger's Malice and Falshood': *Six Issues*

American newspaper publishing underwent a period of experimentation in concept as well as in sponsorship during the first part of the eighteenth century. Campbell conceived of his *Boston News-Letter* as creating a more or less permanent record of public events, which he called a 'thread of occurrences.' This consisted of a dogged recording of European news items in chronological order, maintaining continuity from number to number even though it meant lagging many months behind. The *New-England Courant*, the *New-England Weekly Journal*, and the *Weekly Rehearsal* all combined the idea of the literary essay journal, like the *Spectator* and the *Tatler*, with the newspaper according to various formats and formulae. None of these experimental genres lasted in that form. Yet another form of experimentation was that of Samuel Keimer of Philadelphia, who launched the ten-month false start of his *Universal Instructor in All Arts and Sciences; And Pennsylvania Gazette* with a systematic reproduction on page one of every number of Ephraim Chambers's new two-volume *Cyclopaedia*. Keimer's thirty-ninth and last number, of September 25, 1729, was still discussing, for the eleventh consecutive week, 'Air.' At that point, he turned the paper over to Benjamin Franklin, who greatly simplified its title to the *Pennsylvania Gazette* and went on to make it one of the best and most successful examples in America of what became the standard type of provincial newspaper.²⁰

By 1741, every newspaper in America except Ellis Huske's *Boston Post-Boy*, which hung on until 1754, was being published by its printer. Printers were businessmen, not primarily imperial office-holders and certainly not literary dilettantes like Mather Byles and Jeremy Gridley. The decision to undertake newspaper publishing as part of a printing operation was a serious one, one that, in fact, most American printers eventually made. A printer's question had to be whether a newspaper could generate as much revenue in sales

of the *New-York Weekly Journal*, 1733-34 (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1985), p. 1; and James Alexander, *A Brief Narrative of the Case and Trial of John Peter Zenger*, ed. Stanley Nider Katz (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 8.

20. See Charles E. Clark and Charles Wetherell, 'The Measure of Maturity: The *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 1728-1765,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 61 (1989): 279-303.

and advertising as he could expect to make by devoting an equal proportion of press time and other resources of the printing office to job printing, government printing, and the production of books and pamphlets, either for a bookseller or on his own account. The way in which a printer made a newspaper profitable was by integrating it sufficiently into the economic and political life of the community that it became a necessary and profitable instrument of the community's affairs. In the one-newspaper towns—Annapolis, Williamsburg, Charleston, and eventually New Bern, New Haven, Portsmouth, New London, Newport, and Providence—a printer with the government printing contract and post-mastership could quite easily integrate a newspaper into these complementary activities and make it work simply by not alienating anyone. The situation was slightly more complicated in the two-newspaper towns of Philadelphia, where Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* came to dominate the scene over the *American Weekly Mercury*, and in New York, where, for a time, William Bradford's *New-York Gazette* (1725–44) and John Peter Zenger's *New-York Weekly Journal* (1733–51) were essentially kept in business by competing political factions. It was most complicated of all in Boston, where we can only guess that the motive of at least some of the city's five printer-publishers was to create a market for the productions of what otherwise might have been a marginal or failing printing office in a town that was badly oversupplied with printers.

Two events of 1739 and 1740—the War of Jenkins's Ear and its subsequent broadening into the War of the Austrian Succession and the first American tour of George Whitefield—worked a transforming effect on American newspapers that determined their essential character from that point through the era of the American Revolution. From then on, the content of every newspaper in America was dominated by news, essays, and exchanges of letters on critical public events and issues, an increasing proportion of it either originating in America or having some immediate impact on the American readership. The papers did not entirely

abandon their use of creative literary material, and certainly not of copied European news, but it was the news and discussion of important American public concerns that came to take an increasingly conspicuous place. This transition to a fairly standardized mix of content coincided with the final transformation of virtually all American newspapers to printers' papers.

THE NEWSPAPER IN AMERICAN PROVINCIAL CULTURE

It is easy to discern what constituted the newspaper publishers' intended audience. Whoever actually read the newspapers, the targeted readership was the relatively small group that did business or practiced professions, owned property, paid taxes, and cast votes. Axiomatically, it consisted of white, mostly Anglo-Saxon, overwhelmingly male, propertied heads of families. Not only was it literate, but it was at least somewhat, and in many individual cases, highly educated. It was politically active and presumed to consist generally of Protestant churchgoers. With few exceptions, publishers addressed their papers to 'gentlemen,' or in some cases 'gentlemen and others.' Since printers and publishers, though they may not usually have met the technical requirements of 'gentleman,' shared most of the characteristics and certainly the outlook of their presumed readers, communication by newspaper between publisher and audience took place within a fairly narrowly-defined in-group, or at least so it was assumed.

We must consider, however, the following points: 1. The bounds of literacy were considerably broader than publishers' intended audiences.²¹ 2. Accessibility to newspapers in homes and public places, especially by comparison with accessibility to most other printed genres, was quite simple and widespread. 3. The content of newspapers, despite the elite audience that it was presumed would most profit from it, was intelligible and potentially enjoyable to almost anyone who could read.

21. For an up-to-date discussion of literacy in early America see Richard D. Brown's summary of current scholarship of this topic in *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. 11-12.

Families almost certainly discussed the controversy over dancing assemblies, for example, that was debated in Boston and New York papers in 1723²² and shared the fascination over the English evangelist George Whitefield whose every move was carefully documented in newspapers from Charleston to Boston in 1739. And consider the printing offices, where journeyman printers, bound apprentices, African-American slaves, and master printers' wives, sons, and daughters, most of whom had to be literate in order to perform their jobs, were involved in the production of newspapers: reading copy, setting and correcting type, interacting at some level with contributors, advertisers, and subscribers, scanning and perhaps criticizing the weekly product, and in general learning all about newspapers. One of the 'master' printers was a woman, Elizabeth Timothy of Charleston, and the principal language of another, Christopher Sauer, was German. Then there were the wives, children, and apprentices of other tradesmen, part of the community that did business with the printers and whose exposure to their peers who lived and worked down the street in the printing office, and to the weekly prints themselves, must have been routine.

In short, the newspapers' message almost certainly reached well beyond the audience most publishers had in mind. And if in the mid-eighteenth century, as I believe, newspapers were still serving as extensions and reinforcers of the oral culture rather than substitutes for it, the likelihood of a broadened audience is even greater. The mental world that one encountered in the newspapers was not a compartment apart from other expressions of eighteenth-century life and consciousness. On the one hand, the world of the newspapers brushed against the realm of what might be called 'formal' or 'academic' culture—learned political essays, appropriation of recent English literary forms, biblical and classical allusions. On the other hand, it dignified and made permanent—and, in the form of advertising, made usable—the daily gossip and

22. *Boston Gazette*, November 20, 1732; *New-York Gazette*, December 11, 18, 1732.

worldly concerns that were common to shops and counting-houses, taverns and clubs, wharves and garrisons, legislative halls and council chambers. Newspapers contained no barriers separating the formal from the workaday, the 'elite' from the 'popular' but invited anyone who could read to extend and confirm by print the everyday world already known by ear, and, in the process, to gain access to that other, more formal world of letters heretofore familiar mainly to the educated and the powerful.

In gaining that access, however, the readers of newspapers were also drawn into a mental outlook that was always implicit, and often explicit, in the information, entertainment, and opinion that the publishers communicated to what was nearly always presumed to be a genteel rather than a 'popular' audience. Here is a partial list of the general beliefs and attitudes, implicit in news items and advertising, explicit in letters and essays of opinion, and from which one can discern only rare and cautious dissent, that my own reading of hundreds of British and American newspapers of the period has disclosed: an assumption of the superiority of 'gentility' over the more common orders (except in the *New-England Courant* during its brief career in the 1720s and in certain of Benjamin Franklin's creative contributions in the following decades to the *Pennsylvania Gazette*); a belief in the superiority of the white over the colored races; a belief in the superiority of the English over other nationalities, especially the French, and of Protestantism over Catholicism and non-Christian faiths; a condemnation of the Spanish Inquisition; a joyous approval of the revolutionary settlement of 1689 and a fervent devotion to the House of Hanover, the legitimacy of which was unquestioned; a belief in the liberty of speech and press and private property as guards against tyranny; a commitment to 'liberty,' meaning the opposite of tyranny, as a high political value; a commitment to social order as a political value higher even than 'liberty'; a belief in effective male governance of the family as essential to social order; a belief in the certain, swift, and severe punishment of crime, including the frequent use of public capital punishment, as a deterrent to criminal

behavior; a greater interest in the protection of society from criminals than in the protection of the accused from possible unjust punishment, partly because the accused were usually of the lower social orders and therefore likely to be guilty; a belief in the virtues of industry, frugality, honesty, and piety; the assumption that material success (despite occasional protestations to the contrary) was a measure of good moral character; a belief in science and reason and a curiosity about the natural world, combined in varying degrees with a continued belief in the providential governance of both natural and human affairs.

Individual American newspapers differed among themselves over the details of public policy such as the currency issue and land banks, and over details of religious attitudes, such as whether to support George Whitefield. On these more general beliefs and assumptions, however, there was near unanimity.

From the relative insularity of the seventeenth century, American colonials were now moving into a more acute consciousness of their place in an ever more glorious empire in which they were proud participants and of being partisans and sometimes combatants enlisted in the service of a constitutional sovereign whom they adored against the despotism and popery of France and Spain. News from Europe and the Caribbean nourished this anglicized consciousness and inspired martial zeal, while the cultural products of Augustan England and their American imitations instilled a sense of Englishness, of sharing the tastes and sensibilities of the metropolitan center of their world.

And at the same time that the readers' world was becoming more 'anglicized,' it was becoming more 'Americanized.' With the establishment of every new newspaper, the older ones had another source from which to copy news and opinion from elsewhere in the colonies. Newspapers and their readers did not at any time refer to themselves as 'American,'²³ but newspaper readers of about

23. For one useful discussion of this point, see Joseph M. Torsella, 'American National Identity, 1750-1790: Samples from the Popular Press,' *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 112 (1988): 167-88.

1740 were becoming increasingly aware of what were often called their 'neighboring provinces.' In addition to reporting more than ever before about other British colonies, the newspapers inevitably drew attention to other parts of the New World by printing direct reports of expeditions and hostile encounters in the American theater of the war. The last international conflict had ended in 1713, when the *Boston News-Letter* had been the only newspaper in America. Campbell's transcribed news from London had left the impression that the war was exclusively a European conflict unrelated to his occasional incomplete accounts of Indian raids and skirmishes on the New England frontier. The coming of the war with Spain and its broadening into the War of the Austrian Succession stimulated a very different kind of coverage, to the point even, in 1745, that the *Pennsylvania Gazette* printed a large woodcut plan of the fortress at Louisbourg, then under siege by New England troops, in order to 'render the News we receive from thence more intelligible' and to allow an American readership to participate vicariously in what was, from the colonial point of view, the most dramatic moment of the war.²⁴ The American reader's expanded horizons thus included a newly broadened awareness of the colonial hemisphere as well as a heightened sense of his identity as a Briton.

Finally, the newspapers narrowed the cultural gap between the learned and the merely literate and the information gap between the privileged and the merely competent. If 'knowledge is power,' to borrow the title of Richard D. Brown's important new social history of information in America, this obviously was an accomplishment of considerable long-term importance.

The coming of the *Boston News-Letter* in 1704 made available to the readers of Campbell's 250 or 300 copies much of the same news that Samuel Sewall, Increase Mather, and other insiders had been getting directly from journals overseas and through their participation in the councils of government. The process obviously be-

24. *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 6, 1745.

came intensified with the introduction of every new journal. Advertisements make it clear that, by 1740, the use of newspapers had extended well into the hinterlands of the publishing cities. Communications to the *New-England Courant* as early as the 1720s and fragments of subscribers' billing information for nearly all the newspapers convey the same message. The diversity of advertisements in the 1730s and 1740s, especially in Philadelphia and New York, implies that neither advertisers nor prospective clients were confined to social or economic elites.

There is no question, therefore, that American provincial society as a whole was enormously more broadly informed about current events and opinion in 1740, when no part of the mainland colonies was outside the reach of at least one of the twelve newspapers, than had been the case in 1704. Certainly, an enlarged accessibility to information of this kind is one of the preconditions of a wider participation in government and a more broadly based public opinion. Certainly, too, there were psychological effects on readers who would once have considered themselves forever outside the privileged—and powerful—small circle of the informed. Whatever empirical measures of 'equality' one might devise, the possession of current news and information by such persons cannot help but have been a source of self-esteem and sense of citizenship.

The newspapers, however, contained more than reports of public events. In comfortable juxtaposition with the 'intelligence' from Europe and the record of local legislative acts, ship arrivals, remarkable occurrences, and street gossip, there resided the essays, the poetry, and the learned letters that linked the newspaper world of ordinary affairs with that of formal learning.

Thus, the merely literate readers of newspapers, while being offered the advantages not only of public information but also of exposure to a richer cultural world than they had previously known, were being drawn into a system of shared values and essentially elite attitudes that were part of the fabric in which news and literature alike were almost universally embedded. Whether con-

sciously or not, anyone who read a newspaper in provincial America came under the influence of this cluster of attitudes. To be offered the advantages of reading was also to become a partisan of the ideology that was embedded in the text.

And just as there was no division in the ideology underlying the several kinds of content in the newspapers, there was no intended division in the readership—no dividing up the paper, as in a contemporary American family or lunchroom, among devotees of the editorial page, the sports section, the comics, and the crossword puzzle; no selection of reading according to ‘highbrow’ or ‘low-brow’ tastes. The newspapers had made the news and ‘cultural’ content, to make a false distinction, all of a piece.²⁵ The newspapers thus reflect more completely than any other single printed vehicle of the eighteenth century the ‘collective mentality’ of the age.²⁶ In America, they served no more important function than to collect, embody, and diffuse to a broader and receptive population the shared beliefs that gave coherence to provincial culture.

25. The distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, a development of the nineteenth century, is the theme of Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

26. For a provocative discussion of the concept of ‘collective mentality’ applied to a slightly earlier period, see David D. Hall, ‘The World of Print and Collective Mentality in Seventeenth-Century New England’ in *New Directions in American Intellectual History*, ed. John Higham and Paul K. Conkin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), pp. 166–80.

Copyright of Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society is the property of American Antiquarian Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.