

Colonial Wars Scholarship Essay: Colonial Journalism

The twentieth century has been lauded as the Information Age. As we approach the millennium, I want to examine the contributions of the seventeenth century, more specifically the time before the United States of America was founded, to the development of the Information Age. Some very important and persistent people of this time first sowed the seeds of information gathering and communication by way of journalism and newspaper printing. Early in the eighteenth century, these seeds survived the subscription drought and the governmental frost. Later, the French and Indian War provided the much needed nutrition and sunlight for the further growth of the fledgling newspaper plants. The newspaper industry now provides the giant firs and redwoods for the journalism forests. However, this is an industry that needs continued safeguarding from the threat of extinction.

The first newspaper in America, "Publick Occurrences", was published in 1690 by Benjamin Harris. It survived only one issue because Harris did not anticipate the first frost. In the seventeenth century, Britain still had much control over colonial legislation and administration and the contents of this newspaper were controversial. The government opposed documents printed without permission and warned against future publications without "license first obtained from those appointed by the Government" (Billias 79). The colonists' desire to print news was as powerful as their desire to resist oppressive British acts; therefore, colonists did not heed the warning. However, it was not until 1704 that bookseller and Postmaster of Boston, John Campbell, published the "Boston News-Letter". His successful newspaper even displayed an advertisement! In 1719, William Booker took over the Postmaster position and changed the publication to the "Boston Gazette". A total of ten newspaper chains were formed between 1704 and 1733. Each time, the publishers challenged the authorities by being more exploratory and more rebellious. James Franklin, publisher of the "New England Courant",

printed an editorial criticizing the government for their apathy in expelling pirates from the New England coast. The government forbade him to publish newspapers from that point forward. "American Weekly Mercury" publisher, Andrew Bradford, also had some of his branches trimmed but that only spurred better growth (Brown).

Governmental intervention was only one of the setbacks for the colonial publishers. Newspapers were threatened with severe withering and decay because sources were scarce and labor was harsh. Authors had two primary sources: other newspapers and ship captains (Jergensen 159). Captains would give accounts of hurricanes, earthquakes and other natural disasters that occurred on their trips. However, this news was often months old and the events happened at faraway locations. Local newspapers rarely contained any local news. The only sources for local news were letters to the editor. Townspeople giving accounts of the events that happened in the area were, in essence, the first news reporters (Brown). Even with these letters, editors often had to use much of their own creativity to fill their newspaper pages. The Boston News-Letter of August 10, 1719 desperately printed a rather irrelevant statement: "There is nothing arrived either here of Philadelphia since my last, and therefore not a word of News. It is now a North East storm of Wind and Snow, blows hard and is very cold" (Boorstin 74).

Sometimes, editorials appeared when space needed to be filled. In the May 9, 1754 edition of the Pennsylvania Gazette, Franklin wrote an editorial discussing "the present disunited state of British Colonies" during the Albany Congress. The first political cartoon appeared alongside this article and depicted a divided snake followed by the phrase "Join or Die" (Folsom 201).

The process of publication was most difficult of all. Plants were at risk of being choked by inefficiency. Hand presses, operated by a lever and screw, were not much more advanced than the Gutenberg press, invented over 250 years before. The presses were made of wood with

a lever screw that brought the plate down to form the bed of the press. Type was inked by a sheepskin ball filled with wool. When the lever was pulled down, the type was impressed on the paper. The hand presses were slow and inefficient (Boorstin 57). According to Billias, Isaiah Thomas' "History of Printing" states that American newspapers between 1704 and 1755 had press runs of 300 or less (93). However, by 1765, the press runs had increased to 600 to 800. Despite the undesirable conditions, newspaper production continued to increase. Ironically, the newspapers, often viewed with disdain by the British government, were kept alive by the British government's continuous supply of paper to the colonists.

The demands on the labor of distribution almost rendered the soil infertile. Newspapers had to be carried by horseback to the rural parts of town via treacherous roads. The long trips were made for the few people who subscribed and then circulated their copies. Additionally, some subscribers, few as they were, did not pay their bills. Much space was used simply to beg for the funds (Boorstin 34). These plants would die without financial sustenance. Another contributing factor to the threat to growth was the high illiteracy rate. Only a few people could read. The schools were not supported and teachers were underpaid (Jergensen 112).

The withering newspaper nursery got much needed water and nutrients through the libel trial of John Peter Zenger, printer of the New York Weekly Journal, occurred. The trial focused around a controversial issue concerning New York Governor William Crosby and interim Governor Rip Van Dam. In 1733, Governor Crosby prosecuted Governor Dam and removed Chief Justice Lewis Morris from the courts. These actions spurred political opposition groups, one of which established an opposition newspaper named the New York Weekly Journal. John Peter Zenger printed many articles that criticized Governor Crosby. In November 1734, Crosby had Zenger arrested and imprisoned for ten months. When Zenger went to trial, his lawyer,

Alexander Hamilton, argued that since the prosecution only existed to convict, they were purposely excluding evidence that would hinder conviction. Hamilton denied the charge of libel stating that even though Zenger's publication was offensive, nothing printed was false. Zenger was acquitted and the case became a landmark victory for freedom of the press (Billias 193).

The young trees were ready to grow!

The availability of printed reports as a result of the French and Indian War was the miracle fertilizer for the entire newspaper industry. Newspapers published stories that united the colonies against a common enemy.

The Maryland Gazette published an article by the "Virginia Sentinel" saying (Brown):

"Friends! Countrymen! Awake! Arise...When our Country, and all that is included in that important Word, is in most threatening Danger; when our Enemies are busy and unwearied in planning and executing their Schemes of Encroachments and Barbarity...when in short our All is at Stake...the Patriot Passions must be roused in every Breast capable of such generous Sensations...Countrymen! Fellow-Subjects! Fellow-Protestants! To engage your Attention, I need only repeat, Your Country is in Danger."

The newspapers gave up to date information about the war. They issued journals of the famous generals and soldiers and gave accounts of the most heroic actions. They were filled with propaganda that created a fear of the French and Indians. Although not wholly justifiable, the newspaper accounts brought unity to the colonies. The colonists uniting to fight a common enemy was important when oppressive British acts began. During the time of the French and

Indian war, publishers never had to search for printable information. Newspaper coverage drew colonists into the conflict so effectively that newspaper production rose approximately seventy-five percent from 1754 to 1763 (Folsom 87). This period prior to 1776 saw the removal of all threats to the survival of the newspaper industry.

Although newspaper production had a slow start in the colonies, the editors had the conviction to succeed. The ease in accounting for the war and the availability of war stories gave American publishers a much-needed impetus to continue production full force. In a study of later American history, it is evident that newspapers are still a valued and timely resource. Even with the growth of technology, newspapers have continued to serve as trusted information databanks. Colonial newspaper production and reporting in the period prior to 1776 hold their place in the development of the Information Age on its way to the superhighway of information.

Works Cited

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