

## **The Development of Journalism in the Colonial Period**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the abundance of media outlets providing information on the War in Iraq, the 2008 Presidential Election or the latest celebrity gossip, is almost taken for granted. From television to radio to the Internet, Americans have almost instant access to information about what is happening in the world around them. Americans today, and in the colonial period, have shown how journalism plays an essential role in connecting people to others through a variety of media. And while journalism was restricted solely to newspapers in the colonial period, it nevertheless proved its importance in connecting people to the world as political turmoil and a need for unity among the colonies grew throughout the colonial period.

The introduction of widespread media began in 1456 with the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in Germany. Books, Bibles, and pamphlets became more widespread and the first newspapers appeared in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The first printer in the colonies was Stephen Day, who worked at Cambridge, Massachusetts (Hastings, 1). *Publick Occurrences both Foreign and Domestick* was printed by Benjamin Harris in 1690 but was suppressed after only one issue (1). Several other newspapers followed, including the *Boston News-Letter* (1704) and *American Weekly Mercury* (1719-1746).

*The New England Courant*, published by James Franklin in 1721 was seen as the first real colonial newspaper. The paper expressed opposition to the ruling powers in the colonies and also featured Ben Franklin's first publication under the pseudonym Silence Dogood in 1722 (2). However, production of the paper was suspended in 1726 and Ben

moved to Philadelphia and took over production of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, the most successful of all colonial newspapers. By 1750, there were 14 weekly papers in circulation in the six largest colonies and by the 1770s, a total of 89 papers were published in 35 different communities in the colonies (2).

Despite the large number of papers in circulation by the American Revolution, newspaper publication was originally difficult to get off the ground. Edwin Emery and Michael Emery explained in their book *The Press and America* that colonists were too preoccupied with survival and also already received news publications from Britain. They also lacked the type of industry and commerce and an overall demand that was needed for newspapers to be successful (24). However, the establishment of postmaster and post offices, along with an increase in commerce, in the early 1700s, served as a catalyst for the beginning of newspapers because the postmasters had access to information and were interested in spreading it (30). Emery and Emery cite population growth, improved transportation and communication, political turmoil, education advances, and increased commerce as additional factors that led to the growth of colonial journalism (51).

Mark Canada, professor at the University of North Carolina, described the original colonial newspapers as “small publications featuring out-of-date, often toothless coverage of a small range of subjects” (2). A typical publication was around four pages long, consisting of stories about government and foreign affairs, the weather, and disasters such as fires or diseases. The stories never had headlines and illustrations accompanying the stories were rare (2). The stories that did run in the papers were often out of date – it took weeks for news of an event to appear in a paper – and inaccuracies in the stories were common (2).

The lack of controversial coverage, according to Mark Canada, was the most noteworthy weakness in the early newspapers (2). “If, as has been famously declared, a newspaper’s job is to “raise hell,” then early publications such as Campbell’s *Boston News-Letter* barely raised an eyebrow” (2). Government authorities, who feared the potential power such publications could gain, placed many restrictions over their printing. The Press Restriction Act, which applied to both colonial and British publications, required that the printer’s name and place of publication be included on each printed document (Hastings, 1). Several colonies also required printing licenses (Benjamin Harris’ publication was terminated after its first issue because it violated Massachusetts’ licensing act) and the First Amendment, which promised freedom of the press, did not come until 1791 (Canada, 2). Therefore, journalists often printed bland and inoffensive content that was often reviewed for approval by government officials to avoid being put out of business.

It was the Franklin brothers, James and Benjamin, who were the first to step outside the boundaries of tame and ordinary journalism. James Franklin established the *New England Courant* in 1721, which Emery and Emery described as “the first American newspaper to supply readers with what they liked and needed, rather than with information controlled by self-interested officials. Its style was bold and its literary quality was high” (40). Franklin set a high standard for future journalists by taking the risk of challenging religious and political authorities. Unfortunately, authorities banned his newspaper five years later.

The closure of James’ publishing business may have brought an end to the *New England Courant*, but it was only the beginning of the revolution of controversial and

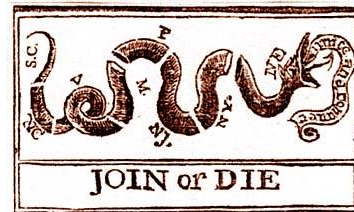
outspoken journalism that was brought about by James and continued by his brother Benjamin with the production of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. Benjamin bought the newspaper in 1729, a year after it had been launched by Samuel Keimer, and was able to avoid the negative consequences that his brother had faced. This was due in part to what Jeffery Smith, author of “Infamous Practices: Risk-Taking in Franklin’s Early Journalism,” described as Franklin’s “split journalistic personality – prudent on the one hand, daring on the other” (42-43). In essence, Franklin was able to please his split audience – the authorities who wanted control and the public who wanted interesting and controversial news – while at the same time pleasing his own “journalist personality – the pleasant and the perilous” (49).

Mark Canada attributed the success of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* to the fact that “it had interesting things to say – and interesting ways of saying them. Had it been a person, those who knew the *Pennsylvania Gazette* might have said it had a winning personality. Its personality, of course, was that of its editor, Benjamin Franklin” (2). *Brights*, a modern journalistic term for quirky stories intended to catch the public’s interest, were one of several factors that were attributed to the paper’s success and reflected Franklin’s personality (3). Such brights gave readers incentive to purchase the paper because they presented stories that would have otherwise been mundane or serious in a lighthearted, enjoyable manner (3). Franklin also sensationalized stories, especially those involving sex or violence, to appeal to readers on other levels (3). Franklin demonstrated a deep understanding of his reader by writing in a sophisticated and scholarly style, thereby appealing to educated readers who could relate to him and to the less-educated audience who could look up to him as a reliable source (4). Franklin’s ability to reach out to and

captivate his audience through a wide variety of news stories and coverage was the primary reason for the success of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* and set a standard for future newspapers.

As newspapers like the *Pennsylvania Gazette* gradually became more accepted and purposeful to their audience, their coverage became more relevant and important to the colonies as a whole. Newspapers became most reflective of and important to the colonial audience during the French and Indian War, which took place from 1754 to 1763. Newspapers such as *The New York Mercury* and *The Maryland Gazette* kept readers informed on the occurrences of the war and also united them through fear of the threat that the French posed to the British American colonies. An issue of the

*Pennsylvania Gazette* published on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1754 featured a woodcut of a disjointed rattlesnake, with the separate parts representing the separate colonies. It was followed by a message stating that “the present disunited State of the British colonies, and the extreme difficulty of bringing so



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many different Government and Assemblies to agree in any speedy and effectual Measures for our common Defence and Security almost surely ensured the Destruction of the British Interest, Trade, and Plantations in America” (Copeland, 5). The “JOIN, or DIE” snake quickly appeared in other newspapers. The *New-York Mercury* produced its own woodcut and the *Boston Gazette* recreated the snake and added the words, “United and Conquer” (5). Colonial newspapers were successful in increasing the unity among the colonies by reporting on Britain’s gradual defeat over the French and creating new

heroes for the press, such as general James Wolfe, who lead the English to victory at Louisbourg, a first in a string of successes (7).

The importance of newspapers continued to grow throughout the American Revolution and well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To this day, media outlets play a large role in shaping the public's perception and attitude toward American and international events. From its humble beginnings with *Publick Occurrences both Foreign and Domestick* in 1690 to the seemingly unavoidable media outlets of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, journalism has played an integral part in documenting and shaping the history of the United States, as well as connecting its people.

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