Agora: Red Deer Polytechnic Undergraduate Journal
Volume 14:2 (2023) Student Writer Awards

Printing a Revolution: How Newspapers Fomented Rebellion

Brandon Holden

Napoleon Bonaparte once proclaimed: "I fear three newspapers more than a hundred thousand bayonets."[1] In the last several centuries, the press has had an inseparable impact on human history. Whether it is simply the chronicling of monumental change or the direct interference in the trajectory of events, newspapers offer a vital window into the past. At the height of anti-government sentiment, the Sons of Liberty and their enemies harnessed the colonial press to their advantage. This paper will explore the tumultuous years before the Boston Massacre and how, through the press, Patriots incited violence against their enemies, exploited the citizenry's anger, and fostered a rebellious atmosphere in the colonies.

By 1760, the fledgling American newspaper industry was in the midst of a boom, boasting 24 weekly papers in major cities, from Atlanta to Boston.[2] Part of the success in this burgeoning industry lay in the hands of Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia, who had created an informal network between papers through a newfangled postal system. In doing so, each newspaper routinely reprinted news, editorials, letters, and essays from others— helping to increase the spread of information and fostering a common American voice.[3] The success of this system is best exemplified in the publication of John Dickinson's patriotic pamphlet, *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*. Between December 1767 and January 1768, the letters began circulating in 19 of the 23 English newspapers in the colonies. Several colonial governors acknowledged the deep impact of the letters on political opinion in their colonies, with Governor James Wright bemoaning, "Mr. Farmer, I conceive, has most plentifully sown his seeds of faction and sedition to say no worse... I have so much reason to say they are scattered in very fertile soil."[4] This reception is thanks in no small degree to the network established by Benjamin Franklin, which allowed the Letters to be read and influence events in disparate colonies. While perhaps the most notable example of such propaganda being spread throughout the press, the involvement of the press, as we will see in the following pages, began much earlier than the publication of Dickinson's writings.

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[1] S.A. Bent, *Familiar Short Sayings of Great Men.* Boston: Ticknor and Co., 1887; Bartleby.com, 2012. https://www.bartleby.com/344/293.html.
[2] Thomas C. Leonard, "News for a Revolution: The Expose in America, 1768-1773," *The Journal of American History* 67, no. 1 (1980): 26.
[3] Roger P. Mellen, "The Colonial Virginia Press and the Stamp Act," *Journalism History* 38, no. 2 (2012): 31.
[4] Robert J. Chaffin, "The Townshend Acts crisis, 1767-1770," in *A Companion to the American Revolution*, eds. Jack P. Greene and J.R. Pole (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. 2000), 134–150.

In the aftermath of the French and Indian War, American newspapers were thrust into the political maelstrom. After the war's conclusion, Britain was heavily in debt and began levying taxes on the colonies to squeeze all available revenue. The new taxes sparked the outrage of the colonists, who were already struggling financially, and felt that they had already contributed heavily with lives, property, and money towards the conflict. Before long, these resentments festered into public protests and open revolt, while publishers and printers turned out newspapers and pamphlets that pointedly expressed their anger and sense of injustice.[5] Notable figures such as James Otis and Samuel Adams were among the most visible and outspoken early opponents of colonial taxation. Otis' famous anti-government remarks in the *Paxton v Gray* case were widely distributed[6]. Adams and Otis would ensure their voices echoed in numerous colonial newspapers - an effort that came to a head in 1765 when the Parliament of Great Britain passed the Stamp Act, imposing a monetary tax on newspapers and advertisements, deeds, wills, claims, contracts, and other legal documents. Because of this, printers began publishing highly polemic accounts challenging the morality of the Stamp Act— an effort that often invited charges of sedition and libel from royal colonial authorities. Printers and publishers felt that the new tax would dramatically increase their newspapers' costs and likely cause much of their readership to drop their subscriptions.[7] John Adams expressed such sentiments in his diary, declaring that the London Ministry was intentionally trying "to strip us in a great measure of the means of knowledge, by loading the Press, the colleges, and even an Almanack and a News-Paper, with restraints and duties."[8]

Newspapers were the vehicle that asserted the most significant social and political pressure on the Stamp Act and were instrumental in its repeal less than a year later. In one definitive example, we can look at *The Constitutional Courant*, a single-issue newspaper published in response to the Stamp Act. Printed by William Goddard, who wrote under the pseudonym of Andrew Marvel, the newspaper vociferously attacked the Stamp Act in fire-and-brimstone rhetoric, catching the attention of printers and royal officials alike. The heading of *The Constitutional Courant* bore an imprint that reads, "Printed by Andrew Marvel, at the Sign of the Bribe refused, on Constitution-Hill, North America."[9] In the centre of the title was the now famous image (originally designed by the old Sage himself, Benjamin Franklin) of a snake, cut into

[5] Eric Burns, *Infamous Scribblers: The Founding Fathers and the Rowdy Beginnings of American Journalism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007), 123.
[6] James M. Farrell, "The Writs of Assistance and Public Memory: John Adams and the Legacy of James Otis," *The New England Quarterly* 79, no. 4 (2006): 533–56.
[7] Mellen, *Colonial Virginia*, 137.
[8] John Adams. "VI. 'A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law,' No. 4, October 1756," Founders Online, National Archives and Records Administration. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-01-02-0052-0007.
[9] Lester Olson, *Benjamin Franklin's Vision of American Community: A Study in Rhetorical Iconology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 67.

parts, representing the dis-unified colonies, with the motto, "Join or die."[10] Other examples included *The Halifax Gazette*, which also published a highly critical account, proclaiming, "[t]he people of the province were disgusted with the stamp act."[11] The damning paragraph gave great offence to the royal government of that province and its publisher, Anthony Henry, was called to account for printing what the Crown considered to be sedition. Papers also reported effigy hangings and the resignation speeches of customs officials. Some newspapers were on the royal payroll and supported the Act, but most of the press was free and vocal. Thus, the press became a powerful opposition to the Stamp Act by informing colonists what the other colonies were saying.

Some of the earliest forms of American propaganda appeared in these printings. William Bradford, the foremost printer in Philadelphia, added a skull and crossbones with the words "the fatal Stamp" to the masthead of his *Pennsylvania Journal and Weekly Advertiser.*[12] The articles written in colonial newspapers were particularly critical of the Act because of the Stamp Act's disproportionate effect on printers. Many newspapers printed their editions with black borders about the edges and columns, which sometimes included imagery of tombstones and skeletons, emphasizing that their papers were "dead" and would no longer be able to print.[13] However, most returned in the upcoming months, appearing without the stamp of approval deemed necessary by the Stamp Act. David Ramsay, a patriot and historian from South Carolina, wrote of this phenomenon shortly after the American Revolution: "It was fortunate for the liberties of America that newspapers were the subject of heavy stamp duty. Printers, when influenced by the government, have generally arranged themselves on the side of liberty, nor are they less remarkable for attention to the profits of their profession. A stamp duty, which openly invaded the first, and threatened a great diminution of the last, provoked their united zealous opposition."[14]

Most printers were critical of the Stamp Act, although a few Loyalist voices did exist. Some more subtle Loyalist sentiments are evident in publications such as *The Boston Evening Post*, run by British sympathizers John and Thomas Fleet. One article detailed a violent protest in New York in December 1765, describing the riot's participants as "imperfect" and labelling the group's ideas as "contrary to the general sense of the people." In another article, Vindex Patriae (no doubt a pseudonym) denigrated the colonists as foreign vagabonds and ungrateful Scots-Irish subjects determined to "strut and claim an independent property to the dunghill."[15] While these Loyalists' beliefs can be seen in some early newspaper articles

[10] Olson, *Rhetorical Iconology*, 67.
[11] Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America, with a Biography of Printers* (New York: B. Franklin, 1874).
[12] David A. Copeland, *Debating the Issues in Colonial Newspapers: Primary Documents on Events of the Period* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000), 195.
[13] Arthur M. Schlesinger, "The Colonial Newspapers and the Stamp Act," *The New England Quarterly*, 8, no. 1, 1935: 63–83.
[14] Schlesinger, *Colonial Newspapers*, 63–83.
[15] Schlesinger, *Colonial Newspapers*, 67.

about the Stamp Act, the anti-British writings were more prevalent and seemed to have had a more powerful effect. Printers were greatly relieved when the law was nullified the following spring, and the repeal asserted their positions as a powerful voice (and compass) for public opinion.

In the autumn and winter of 1768, several years after the repeal of the Stamp Act, Samuel Adams was busy scratching out essays and opinion pieces for various newspapers, though mainly through his partisan vehicle, the *Boston Gazette*. The *Gazette* functioned as a rallying point for like-minded patriots and a bull-horn to spread Adams' message. The *Gazette's* notoriety came from its bitter yet well-written accounts about the perceived injustices in the colonies. Adams wrote fiery reports about the revolutionary cause through this newspaper. Adams assailed the British Parliament over the issue of taxation without representation: "When pressed with that fundamental principle of nature and the Constitution, that what is a man's own is absolutely his own, and that no man can have a right to take it from him without his consent."[16] The office of the *Boston Gazette* on Court Street also functioned as a meeting place for various revolutionary figures, including Joseph Warren, James Otis, Josiah Quincy, John Adams, Benjamin Church, and other patriots scarcely less conspicuous. Many of these figures typically belonged to the Sons of Liberty. In those groups, Samuel Adams emerged more and more the forcible and eminent figure, while his writings were also published in newspapers distant, from New York to Charleston.[17]

A particular favourite subject amongst the Sons of Liberty to attack was the current Royal Governor of Massachusetts, Francis Bernard. In the *Boston Gazette*, one of Samuel Adams' most fiercely loyal lieutenants, the doctor-turned-revolutionary Joseph Warren, published a scathing attack on Bernard. He claimed that "we have known for a long time your enmity to this province, and we have had full proof of your cruelty to loyal people. No age has, perhaps, furnished a more glaring instance of obstinate perseverance in the path of malice. You are abandoned to wickedness."[18] Warren followed his searing rebuke with a cheeky rhyme: "If such men are by God appointed, the Devil may be the Lord's anointed."[19] As Bernard's popularity in the colony began to wane, Benjamin Church, a loose-lipped friend of the Sons of Liberty, leaped into the fray to have his opinion on the matter published in the *Gazette*, calling Bernard a "fop, witling, favourite stamp man, tyrant tool. Or all those mighty names in one, thou fool."[20] Despite the near-constant barrage of attacks, Governor Bernard and fellow loyalists were powerless to

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[16] James Kendall Hosmer, *Samuel Adams* (New York: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1899). 129-130.
[17] Burns, *Scribblers*, 137.
[18] Joseph Warren, "The Devil May Be the Lord's Anointed." *Boston Gazette*, February 29, 1769, issue 674; Doctor Joseph Warren RSS, http://www.drjosephwarren.com/2015/11/the-devil-may-be-the-lord%E2%80%99s-anointed/.
[19] Warren, *Lord's Anointed*. http://www.drjosephwarren.com/2015/11/the-devil-may-be-the-lord%E2%80%99s-anointed/
[20] Samuel Kettell, ed. "The Times by Benjamin Church (1734-1778)." *Specimens of American Poetry*. (Bartleby.com. https://www.bartleby.com/96/51.html)

counterattack, largely because of the sheer dominance of the patriot media. That is until Mein and Fleeming began production of the *Boston Chronicle*.

What happened at the end of 1767 between the printers of the *Boston Gazette* and *Boston Chronicle* illuminates the increasing political pressure on newspaper publishers and the suddenness by which a confrontation could now escalate into violence. From its opening issue that year, the *Boston Chronicle*, published by John Mein and his partner John Fleeming, provoked the city's opponents of imperial reform. Mein and Fleeming started the *Chronicle* with an attack on two of the patriots' favourite British leaders, the Earl of Chatham and the Marquis of Rockingham. Naturally, the Boston radicals who paid close attention to matters of print, Samuel Adams and James Otis, fought back in their dedicated organ, Edes and Gill's *Boston Gazette*. Under the cover of a pseudonym, Otis wrote an essay slandering Mein as a Jacobite. Soon an outraged Mein burst into the *Gazette* office demanding the contributor's name but got no satisfaction. Still fuming a few nights later, Mein managed to track down his *Gazette* colleague, John Gill, and cracked him over the head several times with his cane. Weeks after the assault, Samuel Adams, writing as "Populus," described this clubbing, not as a private affair between the two printers, but a "Spaniard-like attempt" to restrict press freedom. Unfortunately for Mein, this would not be the last time he would have to deal with Adams and the Sons of Liberty; but all of that could wait. Adams had his eyes set on another tactic to dominate the press and sway public opinion against the British.

In the fall of 1768, shortly after British troops began occupying Boston at the behest of the Governor, Samuel Adams and his associates in New York started a newspaper service devoted to reporting the misbehaviour of British Troops called the *Journal of the Times*. The paper had wide circulation, from the colony of Georgia to the city of London. Along with his usual partner-in-crime, James Otis, Samuel Adams was joined in the endeavour by William Davis and his cantankerous cousin, John Adams, who described the *Times* as "working the political engine." The *Times* published salacious and scandalous stories revolving mainly around sexual scandal; news of rape filled the pages, decrying that no woman was safe from the vile hands of British troops, who, throughout the pages, were typically referred to as "bloody-backed-rascals."[21] According to the *Times*, when battalions were not out raping, they were seducing. One story reported that an outraged citizen "discovered a soldier in bed with a favourite granddaughter the other morning."[22] When they were not seducing, troops beat boys in the street, carousing until dawn and profaning the Sabbath with gunfire and horse racing. "Our enemies," readers learned, "are waging war with the mortals and the rights and privileges of the poor inhabitants."[23] Naturally, with such a wide readership and

[21]Richard Archer, *As If an Enemy's Country: The British Occupation of Boston and the Origins of Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
[22] Thomas C. Leonard, "News for a Revolution: The Expose in America, 1768-1773," *The Journal of American History* 67, no. 1, (1980): 31.
[23] Leonard, *News for a Revolution*, 32.

pages brimming with anti-British sentiment, it is no surprise that the populace of Boston began to not only look upon their occupiers with suspicion but, increasingly, with violent intent.

As if the colonial authorities did not already have enough on their hands with the patriot tabloids, the Sons of Liberty were about to drop a bombshell on the news-reading public. Through their contacts in London, the Sons of Liberty received letters filled with official correspondence, including letters from customs commissioners to the Treasury in London.[24] In these letters, James Otis - who had grown increasingly more erratic - was accused of treason despite claiming loyalty to the King. On September 4, 1769, the *Boston Gazette* carried a paid advertisement from Otis, assailing four commissioners. As a further insult to injury, he used their first names in a published tirade, declaring they "are no man worthy of credit than those of Sir Francis Bernard, or any of his cabal." Otis continued to use the *Gazette* to harass one commissioner, John Robinson, whom he called a "superlative blockhead."[25] As if insulting Robinson was not enough, Otis added, "if Robinson misrepresented me, I have a natural right, if I can get no other satisfaction, to break his head."

The day after his angry ramblings appeared in print, Otis caught wind that Robinson had purchased a new stout walking stick and demanded an identical one from the same store. Otis then strode into the British Coffee House, despite knowing it was hostile territory frequented by Loyalists. Upon finding Robinson, Otis barked loudly, "I demand satisfaction from you, sir."[26] A scuffle ensued, and Otis and Robinson came to blows. John Gridley, a nephew of Otis, attempted to separate the two men and, in the midst of the chaos, was grabbed by the collar and struck twice in the head. Grabbing his walking stick, Robinson swung and landed a blow to Otis' forehead, the fight only ending when Benjamin Hallowell, a comptroller, with some difficulty, separated the two men. From that point on, Otis' mad extravagances could be blamed on his wounds; in effect, he became a martyr for the patriot cause. The *Boston Gazette* - the paper that had all but helped ignite the scuffle - characterized the brawl as an assassination attempt, further creating a martyr out of Otis and swaying the sympathies of the readership.[27]

After the Otis debacle, Samuel Adams hardened the lines. At a town meeting in October of 1769, Adams brought forth a list of merchants he wanted to stigmatize who, in his interpretation, had violated the non-importation agreements. High on this list was none other than Tory publisher John Mein. In the years since Mein's last encounter with the patriot press, he had continued his printed slanders, dismissing Otis as a "muddle-head" and the princely John Hancock as "Johnny Dupe, Esq. alias the Milch-Cow," an allusion

[24]Bernard Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974): 271.
[25] O. M. Dickerson, "The Commissioners of Customs and the 'Boston Massacre," *The New England Quarterly* 27, no. 3, (1954): 307–25.
[26] Dickerson, *Boston Massacre*, 311.
[27] Dickerson, *Boston Massacre*, 313.

to the milking of Hancock's vast fortune for the patriot cause[28]. Mein and Fleeming sought to embarrass the Sons of Liberty again, this time by revealing the caprice and self-interest they thought actuated the non-importation boycott the Sons had organized to resist the Townshend Duties. The *Chronicle* featured fifty-five lists of shipping manifests revealing the names of merchants who broke the non-importation agreement, including many who had signed the boycott.[29] Mein and Fleeming had published the lists to suggest the boycott was an effort to eliminate business competition by merchants sympathetic to the patriot cause. Now they had to stuff pistols in their pockets to walk the streets of Boston. In October, the Boston town meeting condemned Mein as an enemy of his country. A few days later, a large crowd confronted the offending printers on King Street, producing a scuffle that left Mein bruised, Fleeming's pistol empty, and a few dozen angry Bostonians facing British bayonets.[30] Mein at first took shelter in the guardhouse, but when Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson did not offer enthusiastic support, the truculent printer departed for England.

As this paper has assessed, the press routinely shaped and emboldened the political landscape in the colonies. In establishing a tight network of newspapers that shared information, word of alleged atrocities spread quickly from Boston and disseminated throughout the colonies. From the moment the Stamp Act came into effect, patriot newspapers took a vested interest in the political future of the colonies, going so far as to begin producing anti-government screeds that blamed and outright attacked the British government. In the wake of the Stamp Act, papers began to align themselves more directly with political factions. They became so vociferous that the articles printed would often lead to violence, in the cases of James Otis and John Mein, whose beatings were directly related to articles published in rival papers. The anxieties and distrust of Bostonians were further harnessed by the *Journal of the Times* - producing some of the earliest forms of tabloid journalism in America. The press ignited violence, peddled deliberate propaganda, and swayed public opinion, lighting the match that helped ignite a revolution.

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[28] Thomas, *History of Printing*, 264.

[29] Jesse Hauk Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library: the Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England, 1629-1855* (University of Chicago Studies in Library science, 1949), 135–136.

[30] Shera, *Foundations*, 136.

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