

Key Themes in the Early Press

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Several themes that would persist into the twenty-first century emerged early in the colonies' newspapers. One was a claim to truth. As shown by the prospectuses of *Public Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick* [sic] and many others, the veracity of their newspapers – or at least the perception of truth in their accounts – was a major concern of Benjamin Harris and most other publishers. They clearly were aware that their chief competitor was not another newspaper – often there was none – but gossip, word-of-mouth transmission of people living in close proximity. The arrival of a second or third newspaper competitor in town might turn the focus to which sheet had the most accurate – or plausible – reports, but always the task was to get out in front of the corner chat or tavern gossip.

Credibility has been a concern of journalists throughout history, exacerbated by social media in modern times, but not a new issue even in 1690. As historian Sheila McIntyre notes, “Except for broadsides, certain other targeted printed works, and formal, hand-copied news-letters, before the newspaper’s [the *Boston News-Letter*] arrival in 1704, face-to-face communication and personal letters were the most effective means of diffusing information”¹

It was with that in mind that even the earliest news aggregators, to use a modern term, were at pains to collect news accurately from reliable sources, to update or correct their reports as needed, and to acquire news items they thought of interest or importance to readers of their hand-written news-letters that circulated by post rider throughout the colonies.²

¹ Sheila McIntyre, “‘I Heare It So Variouslly Reported’: News-Letters, Newspapers, and the Ministerial Network in New England, 1670-1730,” *New England Quarterly* 71, no. 4 (Dec., 1998): 593-614, at 595.

² *Ibid.*, 597.

In their introductory prospectuses, the early newspaper editors assured readers of their fidelity to facts and contempt for rumor and falsehood. In 1690, Harris declared to readers that “the Publisher will take what pains he can to obtain a Faithful Relation of all such things; and will particularly make himself beholden to such Persons in Boston whom he knows to have been for their own use the diligent Observers of such matters.”³

He added his hope:

*That some thing may be done towards the Curing, or at least the Charming of that Spirit of Lying, which prevails amongst us, wherefor nothing shall be entered, but what we have reason to believe is true, repairing to the best fountains for our Information. And when there appears any material mistake in any thing that is collected, it shall be corrected in the next.*⁴

And he promised that:

*[T]he Publisher of these Occurrences is willing to engage, that whereas, there are many False Reports, maliciously made, and spread among us, if any well-minded person will be at the pains to trace any such false Report so far as to find out and Convict the First Raiser of it, he will in this Paper (unless just advice is given to to [sic] the contrary) expose the Name of such person as A malicious Raiser of the false Report. It is suppos'd that none will dislike this Proposal but such as intend to be guilty of a villainous Crime.*⁵

As the second newspaper proprietor in the colony, John Campbell likewise declared that one of his goals in establishing the *Boston News-Letter* was “to give a True account of All Forreign and Domestick Occurrences, and to prevent a great many false reports of the same.”⁶

³ Benjamin Harris, Prospectus, *Public Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick*, Boston, Sept. 25, 1690. I have used the Hathi Trust Digital Library reproduction accessed at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=dul1.ark:/13960/t7bs1p444&view=lup&seq=1>. Except for recasting the medial S's, which look like F's but were, in fact, S's, in proper English usage for hundreds of years before the 1800s, all spelling, punctuation, and syntax are in the original. Since headlines were seldom used in colonial newspapers, stories are identified by their first few words for citation purposes.

⁴ Ibid. Italics in the original.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ John Campbell, “Advertisement,” *Boston News-Letter*, April 9, 1705.

In Philadelphia, Andrew Bradford told readers that the *American Weekly Mercury*, the colonies' fourth newspaper and first published outside Boston, would give "an Impartial account of Transactions, in the Several States of Europe, America, &c."⁷

Press freedom

Foremost of the enduring themes was freedom of the press, although as Clark notes, the concept was not fixed in English law at the time.⁸ When Harris published *Occurrences*, the British government exercised the power to control content and shut down offending press, as it did with Harris' paper in Boston and had with his papers in London. Historians Folkerts, Teeter, and Caudill, point out that:

Colonial leaders were little different from the English kings in their fears that diversity of opinion would disrupt the colonies. ... Virginia, populated by royalist Anglicans and given to commercial development rather than religious purity, rejected the printing press perhaps even more than New England Puritans. In 1671, the royal governor of Virginia, William Berkeley, thanked God that there were no uncontrolled presses or free schools in his colony, [saying that because] 'learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing has divulged them, and libels against the best government. God keep us from both.'⁹

The seesaw between Roman Catholic and Anglican administrations in Britain, each exercising controls on the press, began to stabilize late in the seventeenth century but not before *Occurrences* ran afoul of the authorities and not without leaving fears of government control that would last well into the present.

⁷ "Advertisement," *American Weekly Mercury*, Philadelphia, PA, December 22, 1719. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*. Accessed at <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/apps/readex/doc?p=EANX&docref=image/v2%3A10380B67EBBF3BE8%40EANX-105E3D4EBA3100DB%402349267-105E3D4EF39DC48C%401-105E3D4F4769EA38>.

⁸ Charles E. Clark, "Boston and the Nurturing of Newspapers: Dimensions of the Cradle, 1690-1741," *New England Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (June, 1991): 243-271, at 248.

⁹ Jean Folkerts, Dwight L. Teeter Jr., and Edward Caudill, *Voices of a Nation: A History of Mass Media in the United States*, 5th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2009), p. 13.

In 1733, a purported letter writer to John Peter Zenger's *New-York Journal* submitted an excerpt from the inaugural issue of the *South Carolina Gazette*, urging Zenger to republish it. He did:

The Liberty of the Press is absolutely necessary to the Liberty of Great Britain. ... Neither do I see how any Restraint can be put upon the Press, in a Nation that pretends to Liberty, but what is just sufficient to prevent Men from writing either Blasphemy or Treason. The Liberty of the Press is the most unlucky Scourge that can hang over the Heads of a corrupt and wicked *Ministry*; and when this essential Branch of our Liberties is either attack'd, abridged, or taken away from us, every Man without any Pretensions to the Spirit of Prophecy may certainly predict Slavery and ruin to his *Fellow Citizens*.¹⁰

His correspondent presciently told Zenger he hoped "they won't displease here, nor be deemed Sedition, because it is the Governments [sic] Paper there."¹¹ A year later, Zenger would be accused of seditious libel for other material he printed in the *Journal*.

In 1734, Andrew Bradford filled three-quarters of his *American Weekly Mercury* with a meandering appeal for a free press, the writer concluding, "As therefore you love your *Liberties*, (my dear Countrymen) support and defend the *Liberty of the Press*."¹²

Pay the printer

Another important theme was the need for subscribers and for subscribers to pay for their newspapers. Early in the nineteenth century, the issue would become a real contest between readers who felt they had a right to the news and publishers who needed to be paid. But from the beginning, repeated appeals to subscribers underscored the fragile economics behind the earliest newspapers. In the eighteenth century in particular but in the nineteenth as well, newspapers had a precarious life, and runs of two years or fewer were not uncommon.

¹⁰ "Mr. Zenger," *South Carolina Gazette*, February 2, 1733, reprinted in *New-York Weekly Journal*, March 4, 1733.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² "Mr. Bradford," *American Weekly Mercury*, Philadelphia, April 28, 1734.

Having begun the *Boston News-Letter* in 1704 and with no newspaper competition, John Campbell nevertheless on August 25, 1705, appealed:

At the Desire of several Gentlemen, Merchants and others, who are willing to Contribute towards supporting this Public Print of Intelligence, the Undertaker has ... hopes of others following their good Example, whereby it may be carried on at least another year: And therefore all Persons in Town and Country, who have a mind to encourage the same, may have said News Letters every week by the year upon reasonable Terms, agreeing with John Campbell Postmaster of Boston for the same.¹³

It would not be the last such appeal even before the arrival of the competing *Boston Gazette* in 1719

With his *Rhode Island Gazette* less than three months old, James Franklin, brother of Benjamin, told readers on January 25, 1733, that that the life of the of the paper depended “on punctual Quarterly Payments, or a greater Number of Subscribers.”¹⁴ The desired help did not materialize and the paper failed just a few months later.

In 1769, William Goddard ran advertisements in newspapers around the colonies that were acting as his agents for the *Pennsylvania Chronicle and Universal Advertiser* announcing improvements to his paper, including embellishing it with copper plates, “which is sold separate,

¹³ Isaiah Thomas, *The History of Printing in America*, 2nd ed. (Barre, MA: Imprint Society, 1970), 216.

¹⁴ Benjamin Franklin, *Rhode Island Gazette*, January 25, 1733. Quoted in “Anthony Afterwrit,” an Honest Tradesman: *The Rhode Island Gazette*, January 25, 1733, Newport Historical Society. Accessed at <https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/newporthistory/vol70/iss245/3/>

could not be afforded for the Price [ten shillings¹⁵] of a Year's Chronicle."

After explaining that he had founded the paper to serve the public, "(as well as to obtain for himself such moderate subsistence as one of his profession has a right to expect)," and outlining a bigger, better *Chronicle*, Goddard told readers that:

The extraordinary expenses that the printer must necessarily incur, by providing these improvements, will require *further Encouragements*, and induce him, while he is returning Thanks to his present generous subscribers, to solicit the favour of others, as every one must be sensible from so small a price as *Ten Shillings* a year, and the constant and incidental expense of the Press, how small a profit will remain to the Printer. – Nor can the advance of *Five Shillings*, for the first Half year, which he requests from every subscriber, both new and old, be looked upon as unreasonable, on the present improved and expensive plan, which will require an immediate supply.¹⁶

¹⁵ Examination of extant newspapers indicates that 10 shillings per year was a common subscription rate. Although translating the British colonial monetary system of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries yields inexact and competing values (David Walbert, "The Value of Money in Colonial America," NCPedia. Accessed at <https://www.ncpedia.org/anchor/value-money-colonial-america>), a British National Archives currency (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk) suggests that 10 shillings in the early to mid-eighteenth century was equal to about £59 in 2017, and that equals about \$75 (<https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter/convert/?Amount=58.90&From=GBP&To=USD>), which the Archives reports was five days' wages for a skilled tradesman in 1770. Although the Archives figure may be for workers in Great Britain, Lindert and Williamson report that income per capita in 1774 was nearly the same in Great Britain as in the colonies, both in current dollars (\$69.1 to \$69.5) and considerably larger in the colonies in terms of purchasing power from 1700 to 1774. Peter H. Lindert and Jeffrey G. Williamson, "American Colonial Incomes, 16500-1774," *Economic History Review* 69, no. 1 (2016): 54-77.

¹⁶ Goddard, William. "PROPOSALS for Continuing and Improving the PENNSYLVANIA CHRONICLE, AND UNIVERSAL ADVERTISER." *The Connecticut Courant (1764-1774)*, May 29, 1769. <http://libproxy.lib.unc.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/docview/552515262?accountid=14244>.