

News before democracy

Andrew Pettegree, University of St Andrew

Churchill Rooms, House of Commons, 18 March 2014

One of the strangest experiences for me, as a historian, in publishing my recent book on *The Invention of News*, has been that many early reviewers seem to have been less interested in the story I tell than in what I think might happen in the future; or indeed, in the case of Jeremy Paxman's *Guardian* review, what they themselves think.¹ At first this was rather daunting, because that is not really what the book is about. In the period I study rulers would look to their astrologers to tell them what would happen in the future, and the historians would wait until events had occurred before having their say. Prediction goes very much against the grain. But I was partly reassured when I realised that in this new world of 21st century astrological prediction there are no real penalties for being wrong.² If I were to say, and put in print, that Napoleon won the battle of Waterloo, that might well be the end of my career as a professional historian. But for economists, political pundits and journalists, it seems that no such rules apply. The guru who predicted that unemployment would reach five million in the UK as a result of current government policy still writes his column.³ Pundits who predicted that Romney would beat Obama, even in some cases stoutly maintaining this view for much of election night, are still very much in demand.⁴

As a historian I don't have to go down that road. *The Invention of News* is a book about the past. It does not offer comment on the present health of the news industry. Still less does it attempt inspired prophecy about the future shape of news delivery, and the likely fate of current news organisations. But it does, at least implicitly, hint that current debates about the future of the press could be more fruitful if informed by a more accurate historical consciousness.

¹ Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of News. How the World Came to Know about Itself* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). For the reviewer as weary prognosticator see Jeremy Paxman at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/feb/19/invention-news-andrew-pettegree-alain-de-botton>.

² This is also, rather more surprisingly, true of astrologers whose prognostications of the fate of princes were wide of the mark. See Monica Azzolini, *The Duke and the Stars. Astrology and Politics in Renaissance Milan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

³ <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2009/oct/26/youth-unemployment-to-rise-blanchflower>.

⁴ For Nate Silver's caustic analysis of punditry in the 2008 election see *The Signal and the Noise. The Art and Science of Prediction* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), pp. 47 ff. along with a brutal dissection of the failure to predict the banking crisis of 2008.

This has never been more evident than in the recent debates about press freedom, stemming from the Leveson enquiry in the UK, and, less systematically, the Wikileaks and Snowden revelations.⁵ The Leveson recommendations prescribe limited statutory regulation of press excesses. Those opposed to Leveson regard this as a fundamental threat to press freedom, and here they can draw emotional reinforcement from a long and evocative list of historical precedents of prescriptive government regulation: the Licencing Act of 1662, the Stamp Act of 1712, the prohibition of parliamentary reporting, the taxes on knowledge in the nineteenth century. Here writers are tapping into a noble historical tradition that presents the history of the press as a progression towards ever more open dissemination of news to an ever growing public, punctuated by moments of heroic struggle.⁶

Two characteristics dominate this narrative. Firstly, the history of news gathering has to this point been very largely written as the history of newspapers. This is not least because the first histories of news were written when newspapers had become the dominant form of news medium, and seemed likely to remain so. Secondly this narrative is underpinned by a dominant rhetoric that sets a press pursuing the widest possible access to news against governments determined to shape, limit or control public understanding. This is certainly a useful rhetoric tool in the lobbying against Leveson. But as a statement of historical reality it is very far from the mark. As I demonstrate in my book, there was a large and diverse market for news before the invention of newspapers, and the first newspapers actually struggled to find a place in this market. Further, and this is perhaps the most surprising aspect, the pressures for control and regulation came overwhelmingly from within the publishing industry itself. Publishers, as we will see, frequently petitioned governments to impose closer controls over the output of their own product.

Europe's rulers, on the other hand, were often desperate to get their message out, and found this extremely challenging. We see this in the period when the infrastructure of news was first being assembled in the fourteen and fifteenth centuries. In these two centuries news was only regularly available to members of Europe's power elites: the church, international merchants, and Europe's rulers. Of the three, Europe's princes had by far the hardest time of it. The church possessed a natural infrastructure of news-gathers, with pilgrims criss-crossing the continent and petitioners and

⁵ The Leveson enquiry into 'the culture, practices and ethics of the press' was established in July 2011 and reported in November 2012. For the report see <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140122145147/http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/hc1213/hc07/0780/0780.asp>.

⁶ Bob Clarke, *From Grub Street to Fleet Street. An illustrated History of English Newspapers to 1899* (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004).

penitents on their way to Rome. Very often they could be persuaded to carry letters with them; as they sheltered in monasteries along the way they swapped news for hospitality. Merchants had an obvious need for news, and could get it and send it through their agents or family members placed in different ports. But for Europe's rulers, making their wishes known to widely dispersed subjects was difficult and expensive, and finding out what was going on abroad harder still. Often they relied on the international merchant families to keep them informed. When they attempted to put their own intelligence infrastructure in place, by the use of resident ambassadors, this was extremely expensive and not very effective. Governments were always at a disadvantage in the world of information.⁷

So it is no surprise that when the invention of printing introduced a new communication medium at the end of the fifteenth century, princes were the first to embrace its possibilities. The German Emperor Maximilian, instead of sending hand-written instructions to dependent nobles and towns, now began to print these proclamations, often on a single sheet to be displayed in the local town square. These proclamations had a strong explanatory function. They almost never simply stated what was required of their subjects: rather they explained why it was necessary to raise taxes, expel beggars, or clear pigs off city streets. These official publications played an important role in building a news public. They also alerted printers to the commercial potential of news, because this was an ideal commission for a publisher: a simple job, printed for a single client, paid in cash.

Unfortunately only one local printer could be the King's printer; industry competitors cast around for other ways to exploit the interest in current affairs. The result, from around the 1520s, was the growth of a lively market for news pamphlets, bringing news of battles, sieges and wars, crime and natural disaster, royal births, marriages and deaths.⁸ They responded to great and unusual events, and they proved extremely popular with the purchasing public. But this popularity began increasingly to compromise their value as a news medium. In the first place the need for news to be entertaining to sell, raised fears that their authors might exaggerate or embellish the truth for commercial reasons. Naturally, pamphleteers resented such insinuations, and emphasised their point by defiantly entitling their pamphlets, 'A true account ...'; 'A fair and accurate narrative ...' But as so often, the more insistent these truth claims, the more questionable they seemed.

⁷ States routinely opened the outgoing despatches of ambassadors of potentially hostile powers. See Pettegree, *Invention*, chapter 5: 'Confidential Correspondents'.

⁸ A search for news books on the Universal Short Title Catalogue (USTC) (<http://ustc.ac.uk>) turns up 9,654 hits.

These news pamphlets were also profoundly regime friendly. On the whole publishers would publicise only the triumphs and virtues of their local rulers. This was not as a result of censorship but through a mixture of prudence, and a desire to sell the local population what they wanted to buy. Readers wanted to be reassured, not terrified. So French publishers in the 1540s were turning out reports of tiny victories for French troops when the Emperor's invading army was 100 miles from the gates of Paris.⁹ This might have been good for morale; but those who needed to have a truer picture of the international military balance – merchants with goods to put on the road for instance – began to look elsewhere for their news.

The result was the growth of a news service that has now almost wholly slipped from view: hand-written weekly news bulletins, produced in writing offices, offering a digest of international news for subscribing customers. These were the first serial news publications, and their proprietors ran the first news agencies: and they were hand-written, not printed, and then privately distributed. They achieved a high reputation for reliability. In style they consciously differentiated themselves from the news pamphlets. They were always anonymous, never signed. They offered no context, commentary or explanation. They offered plain facts for those in circles of power, who might be expected to be able to interpret them. The service was extremely expensive, but this was by far the most influential form of news service; it endured three centuries into the age of print, right up until the end of the eighteenth century. And it was these hand-written newsletters, rather than the more rumbustious pamphlets, that were the true ancestors of the newspapers. Yet these hand written news services are so little known today that most histories of news ignore them altogether.¹⁰

The first newspaper was established in Strasbourg in 1605.¹¹ Its founder Jacobus Carolus was already the proprietor of a manuscript news service. What he was doing here was mechanising an existing service to reach more customers. But as soon as he had begun publishing he went to the Strasbourg Council to ask for a local monopoly. In return for his investment in this new enterprise he expected to be freed from the danger of competition. This became the norm as newspapers spread through northern Europe: in only a very few places was there ever more than one

⁹ Andrew Pettegree, 'A provincial news community in sixteenth-century France', in his *The French Book and the European Book World* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 19-42.). David Potter, *Renaissance France at War. Armies, Culture and Society, c. 1480-1560* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008).

¹⁰ 'Before the 20th century, news was circulated only in print.' George Brock, *Out of Print. Newspapers, journalism and the business of news in the Digital Age* (London: Kogan Page, 2013).

¹¹ Johannes Weber, 'Strassburg 1605. The Origins of the Newspaper in Europe', *German History*, 24 (2006), pp. 387-412.

newspaper, and the system of local monopoly continued, with few exceptions, for almost two centuries.

In this Carolus and his fellow newspapermen were only following an instinct among industry professionals evident from the first days of print: to constrain, channel and limit production to a limited number of privileged members of the trade. This should always be born in mind when we speak of government or church censorship in this period: in truth such systems of official regulation were always less effective than those operated within the industry itself to create local monopolies and guarantee profit.

The second defining characteristic of the first newspapers was their limited ambition. They contained scarcely any domestic news and no comment or interpretation. Mostly they were just digests of foreign events copied directly from the manuscript news sheets: movements of troops, diplomatic comings and goings, the appointment of ministers. To many of their readers they must have been incomprehensible. If you did not know who was the Duke of Modena, and why he was in Florence, you were not told. The news was printed in the order it came to hand. There was no attempt to prioritise important stories, or highlight them on the page. The most important story was often buried on an inside page. Of course this was partly because the newspaper men did not know themselves which of the barrage of events would turn out to be important. Unlike the authors of pamphlets they were writing in the middle of events, without the benefit of hindsight.

The early newspapers were almost all the work of a single proprietor, with no journalistic staff. They kept the show on the road as best they could, and if they had no news, they sometimes offered their readers a few poems.

Not surprisingly these early newspapers were a hard sell. Only in London, with the development of a party system in the eighteenth century, were conditions right for the development of a contentious, partisan press. This brought heat but not much enlightenment. Editors delighted in pointing out errors of fact in competing papers, but most were fully paid up agents of either Whigs or Tories. Samuel Johnson, reflecting the cynicism of the time, famously defined 'Gazetteer' in his dictionary as 'a term of the utmost infamy, usually applied to wretches who were hired to vindicate the Court'. His contempt for journalists did not prevent him from accepting a pension to write for the Earl of Bute, favourite and minister of George III.

The heroic self-image of the journalist as a fearless teller of truth was essentially the creation of the early 20th century, the first age in which journalism became a recognised and respectable profession. Here the crucial milestone was the work of Walter Lippmann, who in a seminal work of 1922 set out the responsibilities of the new professionalised journalist to organise and explain.¹² Confronting the complexity of modern society, Lippmann doubted the ability of the newly enfranchised citizens to make sense of the cacophony of events. Journalists would provide the key to understanding, mediating between the complexity of politics and world affairs and the limited intelligence of the public.

This gatekeeper function proved immensely alluring to a newly emerging professional class of trained journalists, reinforced by the rugged biographies of the 20th century generation of star reporters, Martha Gellhorn, Walter Shirer and the war correspondent.¹³ This was all the more ironic because it would be in the realm of foreign policy, the traditional domain of journalism, that the failure to tell truth unto power would be most egregious; the journalist as embedded patriot.¹⁴

But it does not require great or turbulent events to bring out an instinct on the part of those reporting the news to shape and organise output, often in regime-friendly way. The most profound development in the news industries of the last two centuries had been the increased attention devoted to domestic politics, virtually a no go area in the period I have written about in my book. It is here that the gatekeeper function articulated by Lippmann had been a most profound organising, and some would argue, ethical principle. Lippmann was talking about newsprint, but the gatekeeper function made a seamless transition to the age of television, reinforced by the small number of outlets, the BBC, ITN, the American networks; competitors in some respects but in others an intellectual cartel.¹⁵ Their greatest power was to decide what was, and what was not news, exercised not doubt with due respect to journalistic principles and balance, but also with an imperial sense of rectitude and entitlement.

It is here, I think, that the imagined dichotomy of the Leveson debate breaks down most fundamentally: the rhetorical contrast between a press eager for untrammelled debate and a government posed threateningly to stifle public access. Because in everyday reality it is often

¹² Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Digireads, 2011).

¹³ Fred Inglis, *People's Witness. The Journalist in Modern Politics* (London: Yale University Press, 2002). Steve Wick, *The Long Night. William L. Shirer and the Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁴ Philip Knightley, *The First Casualty. From the Crimea to the Falklands: the War Correspondent as Hero, Propagandist and Myth Maker* (London: Pan Books, 1989).

¹⁵ Williams and Delli Carpini, *After Broadcast News*, pp. 51-103.

governments that struggle to get their message across, and journalists who decide to withhold, suppress or underplay stories they choose not to share with the public. This aspect of journalism, the decision as to what is newsworthy and to be shared with the public, is part of the everyday task of manufacturing the package to be described as news, but it is seldom problematized in textbooks on media studies, where the state is invariably presented as the greatest threat to press freedom, sometimes joined in the dock by the newspaper proprietor. In this schema the editor becomes the proprietor's sometimes unwilling agent, and the hard-toiling journalist their victim.¹⁶

This seems to me to underplay the agency of the individual journalist. There is any number of reasons why journalist do not report what they know. Some are perfectly proper, and show a decent ethical restraint: a need to protect sources, sensitivity to the privacy and potential distress of people not normally in the public eye. But tactics, political partisanship and careerism also play their part. This may seem a perverse observation in an age of wall to wall news, but it seems to me that the greatest power of journalists today lies not in what they report but where they choose to keep silent.¹⁷ This was well recognised in the 18th century, when a number of London papers functioned as scandal sheets, unearthing the indiscretions of society celebrities and then suppressing them in return for a cash payment. This was known as 'selling paragraphs', and it accounts in no small measure for the low repute of the 19th century journalist.¹⁸ The reverse phenomenon can be witnessed in the Indian media today, where celebrities pay to place favourable copy.¹⁹

Recognising the commercial value of scandal brings us back to the heart of the present debates, and I think places them in a less romantic, but more realistic context. It suggests that the debate about free speech is, in the case of Leveson, rather more a convenient rallying cry than a real point of contention. The real battle, post Leveson, is not the inviolate freedom of fearless political reporting, but the right to entertain, and the limits of decorum and taste in the delivery of that entertainment. In this respect we can see that the news market has come full circle since the sixteenth century. In that earlier period, the intrusion of entertainment into news publications, through raucous and sensational pamphlets, seemed to be the greatest threat to the integrity of news, sparking first the birth of the manuscript newsletters, and then the newspapers as the antidote. To be boring was

¹⁶ As for instance in the extremely influential media studies textbook, James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power without Responsibility. Press, broadcasting and the internet in Britain* (7th ed., London: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁷ See particularly Roy Greenslade, *Press gang: how Newspapers Make profits from Propaganda* (London: Pan, 2004). Greenslade also furnishes multiple examples of proprietors and print unions intervening to suppress news.

¹⁸ Pettegree, *Invention*, pp. 312-16. Lucyle Werkmeister, *A Newspaper history of England, 1792-1793* (Lincoln, NE, University of Nebraska Press, 1967), pp. 21, 35. A. Aspinall, 'The social status of journalists at the beginning of the nineteenth century', *The Review of English Studies*, 21 (1945), pp. 216-232.

¹⁹ Brock, *Out of Print*, pp. 147-8.

their guarantee of respectability and truthfulness. Today, to be boring is the kiss of death. Now entertainment represents the best chance of attracting and retaining a following in an age when so much news content is available for free.²⁰

Taking a long perspective, the reporting of news can be said to have fallen into three main periods. There was the five centuries I have discussed in my book, a multi-media cacophony of pamphlets, broadsheets and the first newspapers, but also conversation, singing and public debate. Arguably newspapers were the least functional part of this environment. It is this multi-media environment that we are recreating in the digital age. The intervening period, the long nineteenth century, the golden age of the newspaper, turns out to be quite brief: yet it is this interlude that largely established the historical context in which news is discussed today. One of the most striking features of the new digital age is not government control, which seems to me to be weaker than ever, but the fear that the traditional gatekeeper function of the professional journalist, the right to decide what is news, would collapse under the weight of the new media.²¹ An influential book published in 2011 postulated precisely this: that the hegemony of professional journalists would be destroyed by the emergence of the internet, feeding unmediated news direct to its consumers.²²

Even three years later this seems wildly overdrawn. Since that book was researched and written, the old authoritative news bearers have very effectively colonised the new media, squeezing out the citizen journalists who were meant to take their place. Of the 15 most used news web-sites in 2013, only three are genuine new creations of the digital age. The other 12 are all legacy providers in new digital clothes.²³ There is a neat echo here of the impact of the removal of the so-called taxes on knowledge in 19th century England, traditionally seen as a critical milestone in the development of a free press. In fact, a principal motivation was very probably the desire to rein in the unstamped radical press that flourished beyond the law, by removing the commercial disadvantage under which the more established press laboured by paying the stamp. This was wholly successful: once papers like *The Times* no longer had to pay the stamp duty, the radical papers swiftly disappeared.²⁴

²⁰ Witness here the outstanding success of the *Daily Mail* online, which has embraced a celebrity culture for which its print ancestor would have had little sympathy, and is now the world's most consulted on-line newspaper.

²¹ A process that brings its own dangers, particularly if the audience becomes a projection of journalists' own social worlds. Michael Schudson, *The Power of News* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

²² Williams and Delli Carpini, *After Broadcast News*.

²³ Brock, *Out of Print*, p. 90.

²⁴ Charles Wilson, *First with the news: the history of W.H. Smith, 1792-1972* (London: Guild Publishing, 1985).

In an age of rapid media change, it is very reassuring that historians, unlike 15th century astrologers or modern economists, are not required to foretell the future. But taking a historical perspective, looking back for instance to the last great media shift from manuscript to print five hundred years ago, one can say that such events are always accompanied by a great deal of false prophecy, much of it by interested parties who have invested very heavily in their predictions coming true. Consumers, on the other hand, adapt very smoothly to new opportunity. By and large they embrace the old, without abandoning the new. Three centuries after the invention of printing the most authoritative source of news in 18th century Europe was still the handwritten newsletter.

Much of the anxiety about technological shift is on the producer side, forced to make difficult investment decisions, and sometimes rather testy if consumers do not fall into line. Put in the context of the history of news, I foresee a long future for print, and for professional journalism, though not it is necessarily the case that will the two be in the same place. But it would not be a bad thing if a very present-orientated profession paused occasionally to take the lessons of history.

Andrew Pettegree is Professor of Modern History at the University of St Andrews. *The Invention of News* was published in the UK and Europe on 4 February and in the United States on 25 March 2014.