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## Print and the Public Sphere in

### Early America

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Who can resist the impulse to decry the politics of democracy in the media age? With the relentless reduction of elections to advertising, sound bites, and staged events, all orchestrated by political consultants for broadcast to passive television viewers, the temptation is well-nigh irresistible. Yearning for a time when politics was at once participatory and educational, critics inside and outside the academy look back to shining episodes in the past – the Lincoln-Douglas debates, the Constitutional convention, the publication of the *Federalist* essays – and treat them as emblems of a lost golden age. That nostalgia is understandable, and it affects more than Americans. Ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Communism, talk about “civil society” and “the public sphere” has driven scholarship in numerous fields and inspired a multinational effort to identify the essential ingredients of democracy for the common good.

The signal event in this search was the publication in 1989 of Jürgen Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the first appearance in English of a work originally issued in 1962 and emanating from debates in German Marxist circles, notably the Frankfurt School of cultural criticism. Though little known to most American academics for a quarter-century, Habermas was taken up quickly by political scientists and sociologists and eventually by cultural historians of early America, especially of the eighteenth century. In that era, as Habermas saw it, modern politics was born with the first emergence onto the historical stage of a “public” critically engaged in rational discussion of public affairs. In Habermas’s formulation, it was through the institutions of a new print culture – not just books and periodicals but the clubs, coffee-houses, salons, reading rooms, and libraries in which they were read and discussed – that the “bourgeois public sphere” took shape in England and France.

This argument found a receptive audience in the United States, and it was amplified two years later when Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, first published in 1983, was reissued by Verso Books. Though written in apparent unawareness of Habermas, *Imagined Communities* underscored the centrality of print media to the constitution of the modern world. Under the aegis of "print-capitalism" seeking out markets for readers around the globe, Anderson argued, "rapidly growing numbers of people" in Europe and the Americas came "to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways." No longer were they content to be subjects of "polyglot" empires and "universal" Churches. Now, out of the experience of reading the ascendant genre of the newspaper, they identified as members of those "imagined communities" we call nations, bound together as speakers and readers of a common language and embracing the same political destiny by virtue of that fact. The "public sphere" and the "nation" were thus twins, born of the same historical process. Together, they provide organizing themes not only for contemporary critics of "the media" but also for practitioners in the expansive interdisciplinary field known as the history of the book. The German social philosopher and the British political anthropologist are in fact inescapable presences, their names invoked as frequently as Foucault's in the 1980s, their key concepts employed as self-evident terms. Like the phenomena they study, Habermas and Anderson are fixtures in the history of print.<sup>1</sup>

"Print and the Public Sphere" thus comes readily to mind as the lens through which to survey the contributions of book history to scholarship on the early republic. The theme is not merely a recent fashion. It is nearly as antique as the printing press, whose champions in the Protestant Reformation hailed "the divine art" as a providential agent of human emancipation. "The art of Printing," declared one English dissenter, "will so spread knowledge that the common people, knowing their own rights and liberties[,] will not be governed by way of oppression and so, little by little, all kingdoms will be like to Macarria." That progressive view has leaped across the centuries and found a congenial home in Paris, where *histoire du livre* arguably began with Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin's *The Coming of the Book* (1956). In the writings of Roger Chartier, the current *doyen* of the field, the printed word constitutes an arena of contending forces. "The book always aims at installing an order," Chartier maintains, but its claims are always opposed. Resisting the presumptions of the book, "the reader's liberty" is ever-ready to "distort and reformulate," circumvent and subvert the "significations" deployed to constrain it. "This dialectic between imposition and appropriation"

forms the dynamic of book history. With that assertion, Chartier highlights the agency of individuals in a challenge to the bleak determinism of Foucault and thereby aligns himself with Habermas in Continental debates during the last two decades of the twentieth century. Liberty versus order: that whiggish theme is built into the intellectual foundations of the public sphere. It requires no grand tour of Europe, past or present, to discern the attraction of Habermas's framework for historians of the early American republic. What themes more suited to the conventional narrative of the Revolutionary era than the spread of enlightenment, the challenge to deference, and the rise of an informed citizenry, confident of its capacity for self-government in an independent republic?<sup>2</sup>

With its long lineage in European and American thought, the idea of public sphere carries impressive credentials, and it speaks to central themes in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world. I thus approached the subject, "Print and the Public Sphere," with the serenity of Benjamin Franklin, fully expecting to demonstrate the power of the press in the new republic. I should have imitated the skepticism of Samuel Johnson, who knew that life upsets one's most cherished assumptions. True, Habermas has set the agenda for recent research. With his emphasis on the discursive practices of reading and writing, he enhances the significance of literature in early American culture — a point of considerable importance to departments of English. For historians of print culture, he lends a grandeur to the business of tracking book sales, reconstructing library collections, compiling databases of the "reading experience." Nonetheless, as so often in research, the inquiry has taken surprising turns. The more closely we scrutinize Habermas's theory, the more limitations we find. It took no time for feminists to discern the gendered character of the public sphere. At the center of the historical stage, in Habermas's analysis, is the white, male middle class, the advance agent of progress. Rejecting that view, scholars of women's history have reconfigured the social landscape. Alongside the male terrain of coffeehouses, taverns, and clubs, they locate a heterosocial space of salons and parlors, where women joined with men in writing and talking about books, ideas, and affairs of state. Such revisions enlarge the scope of the public sphere. Other studies attenuate its connections to print. The republic of letters was riddled with contradictions. Even as they professed a new ideal of citizenship, marked by selfless service to the common good, most people declined to abide by its impersonal terms, either in print or in life. Americans in the early republic still inhabited a small-scale, face-to-face society, even in port cities such as Philadelphia and New York, and they were faithful to personalized norms. Print, like all institutions, adapted

to the dominant ethos. Far from acting as an agent in its own right, ushering in a brave new world, it was integrated into a largely verbal culture. Well into the nineteenth century, the media age remained a distant future.<sup>3</sup>

At first glance, eighteenth-century America looks to be an ideal setting for the public sphere. Had Habermas glanced across the Atlantic to the thirteen continental colonies, he would have discerned a society remarkably close to his model, where "private people came together as a public." In the port cities, presided over by merchants, professionals, and gentlemen, there arose a vigorous print culture. Seventeenth-century Puritans had kept a tight control over the press, and Virginians had kept it out entirely; in the following century, Anglo-Americans proved more receptive. Parliament abandoned licensing in 1695, and though the Crown tried to continue controls over colonial printers, it was to no avail. Censorship by prior restraint gave way to prosecution for libel as the main method of regulation. The press quickened with new life in the freer environment. Boston got America's first newspaper in 1704, when a royal postmaster named John Campbell hired a printer and began publishing the *Boston News-Letter*. It was only the fourth newspaper in the Anglo-American world to be established outside of London. Though it is credited by the historian Charles Clark as "an early and crucial agent in the transformation, by depersonalization and enlargement, of the public sphere," the *News-Letter* was little different, in substance or subscribers, from the handwritten newsletters that had been circulating for some years among the local elite. Close to the royal government, Campbell boasted that his paper was "published by Authority" and filled its columns with the comings and goings of ships and with reprints from the *London Gazette*. With 250 subscribers, he had the market to himself for fifteen years. The coming of competition stirred things up. Boston's newspapers began to air local controversies, criticizing ministers and magistrates, and serving as vehicles for factional fights in provincial politics. Six papers were rivals for readers by 1763. By then, the typical weekly had 600 subscribers; it reached many more through coffeehouses and taverns, which were well-stocked not only with rum but also with reading matter. It was good business, as one tavern-keeper advertised, to be "supplied with the newspapers."<sup>4</sup>

The same story can be told for Philadelphia, New York, and other major ports. But in the Southern colonies, printing developed more fitfully. Proscribed by Virginia authorities as a nursery of sedition, the press did not find a welcome in the Chesapeake colony until 1730, when the new occupant of the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg recruited the colony's

first printer. A newspaper, the *Virginia Gazette*, was soon circulating throughout the province. It had to suffice for the rapidly growing population for three decades. "We had but one press," recalled Thomas Jefferson, "and that having the whole business of the government, and no competition for public favor, nothing disagreeable to the governor could be got into it." Only after Joseph Royle declined to publish the "Virginia Resolves," passed by the House of Burgesses to protest the Stamp Act in 1765, did opponents of the governor take steps to find a more congenial printer. By 1774, three newspapers, all called the *Virginia Gazette*, were competing with news and opinion about the growing Revolutionary movement. Resistance to British imperial policy had transformed the press. On the eve of independence, the colonies had forty-two newspapers and eighty-two presses. Loyalist as well as Patriot, with some reaching as many as 3,000 readers.<sup>5</sup>

Colonial observers congratulated themselves on this expansion of the press, in both numbers and vigor, in language that could have come from Habermas. In his 1765 *Dissertation on the Feudal and Canon Law*, a series of newspaper essays composed in response to the Stamp Act, John Adams proclaimed New Englanders an enlightened people. "A native of America," he wrote, in a conflation of region and nation, "who cannot read and write is as rare an appearance as a Jacobite or a Roman Catholic, that is, as rare as a comet or an earthquake." Thanks to broad-based literacy and an educated elite, New Englanders could take advantage of a free press and defend their rights. "None of the means of information are more sacred, and have been cherished with more tenderness and care by the settlers of America than the press." Knowledge was power, ignorance slavery. A decade of debate over the British threat entrenched that faith. "They are a well-informed, reasoning commonality . . . perhaps the most of any on earth," one colonist explained to an English correspondent, "because of the free intercourse between man and man that prevails in America." Crucial to this "intercourse" were "the freedom and general circulation of newspapers, and the eagerness and leisure of the people to read them, or to listen to those who do." Devotion to the press surged in the wake of the Revolution. The United States had ninety-six newspapers at the start of the new national government in 1790, including eight dailies; twenty years later, Isaiah Thomas was able to count around 350. For another three decades, the number of newspapers would grow faster than the burgeoning population.<sup>6</sup>

These developments, set forth by Arthur M. Schlesinger in the late 1950s, are not news to students of colonial America, though they have been rediscovered in the recent wave of scholarship on the history of the

book. I rehearse them because of the centrality of the press to the public sphere, as depicted by Habermas and explicated by Michael D. Warner, whose *Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* first introduced the German social theorist to early American studies. Coming out in 1990, just one year after the first American edition of *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Warner is as responsible as anybody for the Habermas vogue of the 1990s. Yet he was no epigone. Warner creatively drew upon Habermas to develop his own account of the changing meanings of print in eighteenth-century America. To the evangelical Christians who aspired to build a New Israel in the American wilderness, the Bible, "the book above all books," represented the ideal text. It was the pure, unmediated communication of the Holy Spirit. In its pages, hungry souls sought union with Christ. Whether preached from the pulpit, written down in manuscript, or set in type, the gospel was always the living Word. On that model, Warner maintained, Puritans read words in print as embodiments of an author. The Reverend Cotton Mather, New England's most assiduous writer, delighted in giving away copies of his books, and as he did so, he reminded the recipients, "Remember, that I am speaking to you, all the while you have the Book before you!" As originating spirit, the author was one with the text, animating its every word.<sup>7</sup>

This "ethic of personal presence," as Warner calls it, was supplanted in the eighteenth century by its opposite. Advanced by newspapers from the 1720s on, the new ideal of discourse recast the meaning of print in impersonal terms. No longer did it radiate a living spirit, human or divine; cold type carried abstract truth. Detached from specific persons, the press was identified with a general public – more precisely, "a reading public." In the pages of newspapers, citizens followed the rule of reason. They discussed principles, not personalities; they forswore self-interest for the common good. The voice of the press was anonymous. Speaking for everyone in general and nobody in particular, it could claim to represent a new force – public opinion – that was constituted in its columns of type. It thus embodied the sovereignty of the people. The republic was born in print.<sup>8</sup>

Such was the vision, according to Warner, held by the Patriot elite that led the American Revolution and established the new republic. According to its prescriptions, the cultural practice of literacy was remade. In pamphlets and newspapers, critics of the mother country assumed the *persona* of virtuous statesmen from Greece and Rome – Aristides, Cato, Cicero, Demosthenes – and studded their essays with learned references to antiquity. Their duty, as they saw it, was to expose the danger of imperial

measures, to set forth the causes and consequences of the crisis, and to lay out a reasoned plan of resistance. The responsibility of the public was to read and reflect – and ultimately to support the gentlemen who spoke in their name. Though this perspective advanced the interests of a specific class, it held sway in the struggle for independence and achieved its greatest triumph in the Constitution. In the opening words of that document, "We the People," the framers assumed the authority of "the public" and designed a nation. With ratification, that subterfuge became a universal faith. To read the national charter, Warner suggests, is to be subject to its discourse, with no escape from the verbal embrace. "With the Constitution, consent is to sovereignty as readership is to authorship." In that crucible of print, a national consciousness was forged. "The nation [was] . . . imagined through the public sphere."<sup>9</sup>

In that formulation, Warner traced the path from Habermas to Anderson that is now a familiar route. But he did not stop there. The classic public sphere, he discerned, was undone in its turn by a new rendition of print culture. In the capitalist world of Anglo-America, books were marketed as commodities to satisfy individual wants. Reading could serve as a means of "distinction," a way to display status and parade "politeness." Dropping the cloak of divinity in one gesture and spinning civic duty in another, print was harnessed to selfish ends. "It is the self-interested individual, not the polity, that profits from the cultivation of politeness through the consumption of books." A special sort of book was valued above all: the "polite" genre of belles lettres, which came to include the novel. The more Americans cultivated such reading, the further they drifted from the republican realm. In this pursuit of private advantage, they were fulfilling the logic of the marketplace. As Habermas had proposed, the capitalist dynamic culminated in a liberal public sphere.<sup>10</sup>

In this succession of moves – from Puritanism to republicanism and thence to liberalism – Warner charts a familiar course through America's "long eighteenth century." At the time he wrote, historians were still deep in the debate over the relative claims of republicanism and liberalism in our political culture. By now, that subject has been exhausted. If Habermas serves only to illustrate what we already know, there would be little point to grappling with his or Warner's dense prose. Actually, Warner's central contribution was to the field of literary studies. Through his exposition of the changing meanings of print, he recovers a lost world of thought and feeling in eighteenth-century writing. Whatever their aesthetic limitations, the "letters of the republic" performed the crucial cultural work of forming citizens. By that act of retrieval, a literature that has often seemed remote to later generations gains new vitality. No wonder

so many students of early American literature have followed in Warner's wake. The problem is that an incisive account of ideology has been taken for a description of social fact. Print culture constituted the public sphere: that is now the conventional wisdom. Unwittingly, this conviction produces its own distortions. It dispatches other meanings of print, such as the piety of the Puritans, into obscurity, and it sunders the links between text and life. Cut off from the coffeehouses, clubs, and other face-to-face settings in which it once circulated, print now occupies an abstract, autonomous realm unto itself. Such isolationism has generated a backlash. One school of thought, led by Jay Fliegelman and Christopher Looby, insists on the continuing power of speech as cultural performance. "... Eighteenth-century print culture [was] unable to stand apart from the politics of sincerity and authenticity..." argues Fliegelman. "Americans continued to be invested in the affective and personal power of voice," Looby agrees. The point is well taken, though it can produce its own exaggerations, with the defenders of speech and print squaring off in opposite corners. The fundamental question is, as Fliegelman recognizes, more subtle: the "dialectical relation" between the two modes.<sup>11</sup>

The challenge, then, is to situate print, along with writing, speech, and other forms of expression, in its social milieu. From this perspective, we can interrogate the theory of the public sphere. Habermas links together four elements: (1) a style of political conversation (critical reason); (2) a mode of discourse (impartiality and anonymity); (3) a set of institutions (newspapers, bookstores, coffeehouses, clubs, taverns, salons, and other voluntary associations); and (4) a distinct social category (white men of the commercial and professional middle class). In his telling, the bourgeoisie carved out, for a brief but critical historical moment, an autonomous realm, independent of State and Church and separate from family and work, where people could read and reason about public affairs. How rational was that discourse? How impartial? How open that forum? How free-ranging its deliberations? To these questions I now turn, in an historian's exercise of critical reason.

Let us start with the ideal of impartiality, which gave rise to the use of pseudonyms to disguise the identity of authors. That practice originated in the literary culture of gentlemen, who pursued letters for all sorts of reasons – curiosity, sociability, public service, status display – but never for money. A man of honor stood above such mean concerns. Should he deign to offer a piece of writing to the press, he did so anonymously or under a pseudonym, lest the dignity of his name be tainted by being vulgarly hawked in trade. But in the public sphere of the eighteenth

century, the aristocratic pseudonym acquired a republican rationale. "It is of no importance whether or not an author gives his name," one writer, with the *nom de plume* "Philadelphienis," told readers. All that matters are "the illustrations and arguments he affords us and not . . . his name." Yet, in a small-scale society, where people knew one another, by reputation if not in person, it proved impossible to maintain this line. A sixteen-year-old apprentice in his brother's shop, Benjamin Franklin learned that lesson at the start of his writing career. He penned a series of essays in the persona of "Silence Dogood," a moralizing Boston widow, and submitted them to his brother's paper, *The New-England Courant*, secretly, for fear of rejection. The series gained a following, and soon the widow was the talk of the town. After eavesdropping on the streets, Franklin parodied the gossip in "Silence's" voice. One woman claimed, "I was a Person of an ill Character, and kept a criminal Correspondence with a Gentleman who assisted me in Writing. One of the Gallants clear'd me of this random Charge, by saying, That tho' I wrote in the Character of a Woman, he knew me to be a Man." A half-century later, the Connecticut wit John Trumbull stumbled into a wasp's nest of criticism after satirizing his countrymen in the *Connecticut Courant*. In a display of republican principle, he took on the character of a "universal Correspondent" and published his pieces "without the name of the writer to defend it, or of any great man to patronize it." He would trust to "the mercy of the public" for "a fair and unprejudiced perusal." That was not how it turned out. Some readers took the jibes personally, certain that for all his pretenses of impartiality, the Correspondent meant to shame them in public. How dare he assail personal characters, while remaining unknown! The Correspondent had the duty to reveal his name. Trumbull refused that call, only to drop the disinterested pose and exchange tit for tat. He demanded that two critics "throw off the mask" of anonymity and denounced another as a hypocrite for praising the Correspondent essays "in private conversation, where you thought I should hear of it" and then condemning them in public. In the heat of argument, with reputations at stake, civic virtue dissolved.<sup>12</sup>

Impartiality, it appears, was a political weapon, to be used as need be. In the pre-Revolutionary debate over British imperial policy, there was a division of labor between genres: pamphlets took the high road of reason and principle; newspapers descended into personal abuse. It was central to Whig strategy to expose the ministerial conspirators against American liberty, whether in Whitehall or in Boston, and to dramatize, through vivid examples, the "corruption" and "luxury" of royal officials. To that end, the billingsgate of eighteenth-century journalism was well adapted. Peter

Oliver, the Loyalist magistrate and brother-in-law of Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson, who smarted under the attacks of the *Boston Gazette* and *Massachusetts Spy*, grasped the essential technique: a public figure could be hopelessly discredited through humiliation in the press:

[the Faction] used every low & dirty Art, from Mouth to Press, to stigmatize those who would not coincide with their Measures; such Arts as an Oyster Wench disdains to lower her Reputation to . . . If a Man, in publick Office, was advanced in Life; he was an old wizzled Face Dog. If he had met with a Misfortune, by breaking a leg, he was a limping Dog, and so on.

Not only top officials came under the censorious eye of the press; lesser fry also got their just deserts. Newspapers did not hesitate to expose by name violators of the various nonimportation agreements. Conversely, printers risked their safety and their businesses when they actually tried to protect the anonymity of unpopular correspondents. For refusing to name an author, William Goddard, printer of the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, got a beating at the British Coffeehouse. Loyalists played the same game. The tenor of politics was no more elevated in the factional fights of the new republic. In the campaign to ratify the Constitution, Federalists liked to present themselves as gentlemen of reason and principle, but they exploited the politics of personality to carry their cause. No matter that the Anti-federalist opposition clung to the ideal of impersonal print. To block the message, it was essential to discredit the messengers. Hence, Federalists insisted that critics of the Constitution identify themselves publicly, in hopes of exposing their rivals as mere mechanics and common farmers, utterly unqualified to discourse about government. At the same time, they played up "the splendor of names," notably, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, on their side. In the process, Federalists repudiated the faith in impartial discourse at the heart of the public sphere. Anonymity became a despicable cover for irrational, self-seeking claims. The true gentleman spoke in his own person, offering a cultivated model of civic virtue for popular emulation. In the figure of George Washington, Federalists found their man, whose impersonal "personality" – the conscious construction of a lifetime – was invoked time and again to legitimate the new nation.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, the ideology of impartial print ran aground on the shoals of self-interest. It was a rare author who could withstand the temptation to divulge his name in the face of popular enthusiasm for his work. Thomas Paine was not one. When *Common Sense* was issued in January

1776, it carried no name, not even a pseudonym, on the title page. That was a deliberate statement of principle. "Who the Author of this Production is, is wholly unnecessary to the Public, as the Object for Attention is the *Doctrine itself*, not the *Man*." Paine had second thoughts on the matter after the pamphlet proved wildly successful. Though he never sought profit from the work – so he claimed – he did try to control its distribution, and that bid brought him into an embarrassing controversy with the original publisher Robert Bell. Who is this "Mr. ANONYMOUS," Bell asked in the Philadelphia press, this "author without a name," who uttered "absolute falsehoods" in print without fear of detection, in a "cunning" scheme of "catch-penny author-craft" to monopolize the profits of *Common Sense* to himself? To prove Paine's hypocrisy, Bell pointed to the common report: "You say you wanted to remain unknown . . . but, in practice, yourself telling it in every beer-house, gives the direct LIE to the asserter of such a falsehood." Such disputes were perhaps inevitable, when authors lacked legal protection for their rights. For all the appeal of selflessness, anonymity made a person easy prey to the machinations of others. John Trumbull realized that early on and, a decade after the Correspondent series, sent a new letter to the *Connecticut Courant*: a plea for the state legislature to enact a copyright law. Having learned from hard experience that there was no safety in anonymity, Trumbull cast aside republicanism and embraced the market: "A work of Genius," he observed, "is a work of time, the effect of long labor, study, and application." Its fruits rightfully belonged to the author who had brought it forth. This was "a principle of natural justice." Well before the development of an active literary marketplace, Trumbull had discovered the fatal flaw in the bourgeois public sphere. Without a name to which copyright can be attached, an author is public property, vulnerable to one and all. Trumbull had made the odyssey from republicanism to liberalism that Warner discerns as the trajectory of the age. But as Christopher Grasso, the student of Trumbull on whose perceptive account I have drawn, advises, that had been an option from the start. "Traditional, republican, and liberal constructions of public writing – along with a conception of literary practice drawn from the sociable community of polite letters – should be considered less as successive stages or distinct epochs than as overlapping and even concurrent possibilities," to be called forth when the "local cultural and socioeconomic circumstances of print production and public speech are right."<sup>14</sup>

One alternative to Trumbull's dilemma was simply to stay out of print. That was the choice made by men and women of privilege, who joined in the face-to-face activities of the public sphere – the coffeehouses, clubs,

tea tables, and salons – and entered into literary exercises and civil conversation. When the leading merchants, lawyers, and gentlemen of Annapolis, Maryland, gathered together for a meeting of the Homony Club in the tense years before the Revolution, they set aside their political differences and devoted themselves to the pleasures of food, drink, and wit. An evening's entertainment included numerous toasts and odes, performed in a boisterous atmosphere behind closed doors. These pastimes, carefully preserved in the club records, carried on a long, genteel tradition of manuscript culture. Salons, in turn, provided a setting for female sociability and politeness, in company with men. Adopting neoclassical nicknames, the participants shared their poems, letters, and journals, nearly all in manuscript. In an intimate coterie, women could cultivate their talents, without fear of ridicule by strangers. That concern was well grounded. Misogyny, at times, permeated the press. Consider the case of Hudson, New York, in the early republic, reported by the historian John Brooke. In its newspapers, female readers were obliged to see themselves through the male gaze. In fiction and news items, they were portrayed either as victims of violence and abuse or as careless disturbers of domestic peace. Either way, they were defined by male power, the limits to their lives prescribed in print. As the editors made plain, the public forum of the press was no place for a lady. Nor was it congenial to enthusiasts of such religious sects as the Shakers, who followed Mother Ann Lee out of “the world” and built a separate society. To keep out dangerous influences, the Shakers were as inquisitorial as the pope, tightly patrolling the letters and books that arrived from outside. Under the “Millennial Laws” imposed in 1821, “the Brethren and Sisters [were] not allowed to purchase nor borrow books nor pamphlets of the world not of Believers . . . without permission of the Elders.” To the faithful, the spoken word was the most reliable source of truth. Shakers bonded in song and dance, sharing the divine spirit in collective rituals. If print was too vulgar for the gentlemen of the Homony Club, too hostile for the ladies of the salon, it was too profane for the Shakers.<sup>15</sup>

As this brief survey suggests, the eighteenth-century press does not fulfill key requirements of Habermas's model. Its impartiality was inconsistent, its rationally debatable, its openness to subordinate classes limited. Not surprisingly, it also fails the test of independent, free-ranging debate. Both political and economic constraints restricted what could be said. That was due, in part, to the force of law. Colonial authorities intermittently punished seditious libel, and their Revolutionary successors continued the practice, though the Federalists' campaign to suppress dissent with a national law was a political debacle. The more important

source of constraint was the printers and publishers themselves. In Habermas's theory, the bourgeois public sphere maintains a critical distance from the private household, the center of family and work. When people “come together as a public” and enter into rational deliberation, they suspend their personal advantage to consider the common good. Not so for the printers, who made a living as the functionaries of the public sphere. They could not forget about the household; it was the very site of their labor. Ideally, principle and interest went hand in hand. But a man with hungry mouths to feed could not afford too many scruples. Prudent printers strove to steer their way amid the several constituencies on whom they depended. Royal government and local assembly, commonly at odds with one another, awarded printing contracts, placed official advertising, handed out appointments, and distributed other forms of patronage. But such revenue was seldom sufficient. Local merchants and lawyers were thus necessary sources of income from advertising, subscriptions, and job printing. Consequently, though some printers, such as William Bradford of New York, took pride in being a “Servant of Government,” it was good business to follow a neutral course, placating everybody and offending none. Taking self-abnegating vows of blandness, printers cultivated images of themselves as neutral tradesmen, “mere mechanics” with no independent views of their own, smudged with ink merely for the sake of pay. In the businesslike simile of Benjamin Franklin, “a Newspaper was like a Stage Coach in which any one who would pay had a Right to a Place . . .” Liberty of the press was a commercial strategy, not a political principle.<sup>16</sup>

Notwithstanding these pressures, newspapers became more aggressive organs of political opinion during the course of the eighteenth century. Embracing a libertarian ideology, many printers projected themselves as “men of independent intellect and principle.” Their vocation was to be watchmen on the towers of liberty and “scourges of tyranny.” In the Revolutionary movement, Patriot editors performed that role for an expanding market of middling readers. Principle could be profitable, as Isaiah Thomas, who built a circulation of 3,000 for his militant *Massachusetts Spy*, proved. John Holt, printer to New York's Sons of Liberty, deemed “the great Use of News papers” to be “that they form the best opportunities of Intelligence, that could be devised, of every publick matter that concerns us . . . . It was by the Means of News papers that we receiv'd & spread the Notice of the tyrannical Designs formed against America, and kindl'd a Spirit that has been sufficient to repel them.” But, as we have seen, there were clear limits to that “intelligence.” Nobody merited the freedom to advocate at the community's expense. Only a



handful of editors, most of them Loyalists, ever tried to publish both sides of the imperial dispute, and they were mobbed for that effort. It was, in the words of historian John Nerone, a republican "commonwealth of ideas" that Patriot printers promoted, not a liberal "marketplace of ideas" open to any and all views.<sup>17</sup>

On these terms, printers entered the lists in the political battles of the early republic. Few maintained an independence of party, owing to a familiar combination of principle and interest. In the new nation, public subsidies were more important than ever to a printer's well-being, and such patronage was awarded mainly to the party faithful. As newspapers were integrated into the partisan machinery, workmen of the press gained a new stature, especially among the Republicans. They were ideologues by profession, dedicated to the elaboration of the party line. Promoting candidates, attacking rivals, rallying voters, they emerged as the crucial links between politicians and the rank-and-file. There was no dispassionate consideration of issues in their pages, no pretense of impartiality. Editors played up personalities, advertising the virtues of party leaders, exposing the vices of the other side.

The task of the party press was to fashion, through "common rhetoric and common ideas," an imagined community of party, rather than nation. More precisely, as David Waldstreicher has recently shown, it was through party, as represented in the press, that vast numbers of white males – and a good many women as well – came to identify with nation. In local communities all over the republic, party loyalists gathered together to commemorate national events – the Fourth of July, Washington's birthday, the inauguration of Jefferson – by drinking toasts, singing, orating, and parading in affirmation of their common bonds. Such occasions were faithfully reported in the press. Republicans in Richmond could read the speeches and toasts of compatriots in Baltimore and Philadelphia and determine to outdo them in celebration of the cause. Indeed, local festivities were conducted with two audiences in mind: the stalwarts who participated in the events and the strangers who read about them. By this means, newspapers became central to the popular political culture of nineteenth-century America. Immersed in the round of rallies, speeches, and torch-light parades, editors brought together "rationality" and "ritual" in their work. If not the arena of critical reason envisioned by Habermas, the public sphere they brought into print was a livelier place, pulsating with the energy of speeches and marches, the personalities of leaders, and the slogans of the moment. Converting new supporters was not on the agenda. In the Jacksonian "politics of affiliation," the party press preached to the choir.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, newspapers were not indispensable to public life. Out on the expanding frontier and in many rural areas, the printing press was an uncommon sight. The South, in particular, lagged well behind the North in access to print, with fewer papers, lower circulation, and higher rates of illiteracy among the free population. As in the colonial period, the Southern press stayed close to centers of power – port towns, state capitals – and to the interests of the gentry. That did not stop party activists from getting out the vote in the hotly contested elections of 1828 and 1840. They relied on the familiar methods of a largely oral culture – stump speeches at barbecues, court days, and rallies – with great success. Turnout in many parts of the South reached or exceeded that in the North. The age of Jackson was not always or everywhere "an age of print."<sup>19</sup>

By this route, we return to the problem with which we started: print and the public sphere. Was this vision of "private people coming together as a public" and engaging, through conversation and reading, in critical-rational discourse ever more than a utopian dream in Habermas's mind? An earlier generation of American historians once thought so. As Henry Steele Commager saw it, the enlightened genius of the founding fathers produced an "empire of reason." There are few advocates of that view today. The public sphere, as Warner suggests, is better seen as an ideology that informed political discourse and shaped literary forms. Therein lay its power. It was the animating vision of the eighteenth-century Republic of Letters, the cosmopolitan community of learned men dedicated to inaugurating the rule of reason. Imbued with that ideal, Enlightenment moderates pursued free discussion of public affairs, only to set in motion a far-ranging assault on the *ancien régime*. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* electrified Americans with its ridicule of British monarchy as fundamentally irrational, at odds with nature, reason, and the heart. In a republic, the anonymous author proclaimed, "THE LAW IS KING." So, too, did such writers as Mercy Otis Warren and Judith Sargent Murray seize upon the instrument of reason to enter the public sphere and challenge traditional prejudices against their sex.

But one man's reason is another's passion. Custodians of the public sphere held the power to define those terms. Printers and politicians in the early republic lived up to their professions of impartiality about as faithfully as today's presidential candidates to their pledges to avoid negative campaigning. Federalists stigmatized their opponents not merely as ill-informed but as foolish, impulsive, and irrational, altogether unworthy of a public voice. In the magazines of the early republic, the ideal male citizen was admired less for himself than for what he was *not*:

a wastrel farmer, a fickle woman, an animalistic black slave. Dismissed in simile and metaphor, subordinate groups had a long struggle to declare themselves subjects in print. The public sphere could close the very doors to popular discussion of politics it opened up.<sup>20</sup>

It is not surprising that the ideal of the public sphere was chiefly honored in the breach. In a small-scale, interdependent community, where people kept a close eye on their neighbors, print was limited in its effects on daily life; it could not perform the specialized role of constituting an independent public forum. It inhabited a hierarchical and personalized world, and it reflected that ethos. Dissenters could grumble that the country press was typically "under the influence of the little lord of the village" and dream up schemes to circumvent that power, such as Massachusetts farmer William Manning's plan to organize little societies of workmen in every town to subscribe to a monthly magazine devoted to their interests. But there was no escaping the condensation of the square or the gossip of the neighbors, in print or in life. Pseudonyms hinted what they purported to conceal: anonymity could be a path to notoriety. Ironically, it may be this preoccupation with personality that constitutes the early republic's true legacy to our print media today. Raised in a religious culture to seek out the "personal presence" in a text, eighteenth-century fans of the other new genre of the age – the novel – perpetuated that impulse and identified with authors and characters alike. They lionized Rousseau, wept with Werther, and flocked to Charlotte Temple's grave. A culture of celebrity, fusing fact and fiction, was at hand, soliciting the hopes and dreams of ordinary folk. On the commercial exploitation of those possibilities, the media age has been built, with technologies of communication nobody could have imagined two hundred years ago. But for its cultural bases, we owe a substantial debt to the writers, readers, and printers of the new republic.<sup>21</sup>

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## The Rise of Film History

Melvyn Stokes

Moving pictures first appeared, as a form of popular entertainment, in the 1890s. Within less than a generation, going to the "movies" had become a well-established part of American social and cultural life. By 1922, around 40 million admissions were being recorded each week; by 1928, that figure had expanded to 65 million; in 1946, it reached an all-time peak of 82 million.<sup>1</sup> Thereafter, for a complex of reasons, numbers declined. By the 1950s, television was challenging motion pictures – and beginning to replace them – as the dominant form of American popular entertainment. Yet, if actual movie-going became a minority pastime in the second half of the twentieth century,<sup>2</sup> Hollywood's characteristic output, the feature film, increased enormously in both popularity and accessibility during the 1980s and 1990s. The key to this paradox was the emergence of the VCR, cable and satellite TV, laser discs, and DVDs. Under the influence of these technological changes, the main site of movie-watching shifted from the cinema to the home. Films could be viewed by anyone surfing the vast number of television channels (some dedicated exclusively to movies) made possible by cable, satellite, and digital television. They could be rented from a range of outlets or bought in music shops and supermarkets.<sup>3</sup>

The movie business has been a major American industry since the 1910s. With the decline of many other national cinemas during World War I, it swiftly attained hegemonic status in the world. Since then, it has probably done more to shape the way the United States has been viewed by non-Americans than any other single influence. It has also affected the way Americans and others perceive American history itself. Despite the millions of words written about the Civil War and the television programs made about it, for example, it seems likely that most Americans' view of the Civil War and Reconstruction is still mainly shaped by *Gone With the Wind* (1939).<sup>4</sup> Some films actually appear to have made history as well as representing it: *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), a virulently racist