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Earth America
Print and the Public Sphere in
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, on 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 twinned, born of the same historical process. Together, they provide organizing themes not only for contemporary criticism of "the media" but also for practitioners in the expansive interdisciplinary field known as the history of the book. The German sociologist and the British political anthropologist are in fact inseparable 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.1

"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 Macaria." 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 instilling 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?2

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 literacy 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 theorists 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 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
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