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Minor Field Statement: "Trans-Atlantic Print Culture of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries"
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Introduction

A good number of historians spend a good deal of their research analyzing and discussing texts. The written word, while providing the most obvious tool for accessing the thoughts and deeds of the past, has assumed an often-unrivaled status in the historical profession. It was not until Michel Foucault began challenging the acceptance of words as expressions of reality (rather than what he described them as—shapers of perceptions of reality) that the historian's long love affair with the word began to take on a troubled relationship. Regardless of whether one accepts or disagrees with postmodernism, since Foucault and the linguistic turn, historians have assumed a more guarded stance towards words and their capacity to explain the truth. While historians have realized their dependence on text, there still remains an, at times, uneasy, silence as to what it means to define history both in and through written texts.

If words exist as central keys to decoding the past, then understanding their nature and their growth in history remains an important subject of study for the historian. After all, if, as so many historians assert, history is all about understanding context, then understanding the context of the development of printed, mass communicated words remains a vital part of this exploration. Understanding the development and effect of the written word on a specific society at a specific time provides the historian with not only historical data, but also with a broader framework for contextualizing his or her own work and source bias. Prominent historians have devoted a good deal of time tracing the influential role that print played in the development of the life of the trans-Atlantic world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The dialogue occurring among historians of print breaks down into two main conversations: 1) Print's role as a democratizing element in society and 2) Print's ambiguous relationship to the market economy

of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Behind these discussions stands a larger question of what types of causative effect print exerts over history. In reviewing prominent works on print, it is clear that while historians have raised important questions as to print's historical causality, they have not always adequately explained how text, as a physical entity, managed to assume the superior causative role in society that they often give it. What is not explained is how text changed a society more than other forms of communication—such as oral transmission of ideas, ritualized expressions in the form of public action, etc. Part of this discussion must address what (if anything) makes print unique—different from other forms of communication, such as the community forming events in the taverns or the more refined engagements of the *soirée*. Exploring whether text acts as a more potent social force than the verbal expression of the same idea and why remains an intriguing and yet underdeveloped topic.

One issue related to the causality of text that is often overlooked or quickly dismissed by historians, revolves around the issue of what type of *authority* print claims in a particular society, at a particular time and why. While it remains difficult to chart the thoughts of the faceless, often voiceless “public,” the role that print played in shaping, as opposed to responding, to the public is one worth exploring. Understanding the hierarchy of how text was treated, understood, and responded to—author/ audience synergy—is a crucial part of understanding the causative role of print in shaping social consciousness and action.

Print: Liberating Hero of Western Society?

In addressing how print historians approach the topic of print and its causative role on history, one of the key questions arising was how intrinsic in the press was its capacity to encourage democratization or liberalization. For example, some scholars look at the transformative effect of translating the Bible into the language of the people—Tyndale in England, Luther in Germany—and at the emergence of wider distribution of the Bible due to the printing press. These events, culminating in Martin Luther's sharp break with the church in the sixteenth century, many argue, reflect the power that the printing press and printed texts could

have upon large groups of people. Likewise, political historians have a tendency to attribute the political revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the spread of written texts—to the rise of newspapers, periodicals, and daily advertisements. David Halberstam's¹ history of journalism, for example, spells out a fairly clear progressive history that sees print and journalists as moving from mere mouthpieces of those in power, to power centers themselves. He sites Watergate as the cataclysmic epic that freed journalists from the tyranny of the censor and enabled them to achieve their historically significant role as the watchdogs of the western democratic liberal state. This dominant assumption begs the question: Does the printing press have a naturally liberating role in western history? Or is this a twentieth century idea that has sprung from other sources?

This idea of the “liberating” (or refashioning) potential of print draws attention to the juxtaposition of theory and history. Understanding the theoretical framework that many historians rely upon to analyze and interpret the press provides greater context for understanding their historical arguments. The sociologist Jurgen Habermas, exerted (and still exerts) a good deal of influence on these historians as they began to formulate the awakening and politicization of public consciousness. His *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, published in 1962, corresponded with rising ideas about civil society's interaction with politics. How did the events in the taverns and on the street corners, relate to law making in eighteenth century America? Habermas “sketched the eighteen-century emergence of a zone of rational discourse in the association and print, mediating between the monarchical state and the ‘lifeworld’ of society.”² Habermas' philosophical framework, while often adjusted by historians, was generally welcomed as a unifying framework for understanding the multiple layers of life

¹ David Halberstam, *The Powers that Be*

² John L. Brooke, “Reason and Passion in the Public Sphere: Habermas and the Cultural Historian,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXIX:1 (Summer, 1998), 44.

during the Revolution and Early Republic periods.³ In commenting on the significance of this concept, John Brooke noted, “The Habermasian public sphere thus served the critical function of helping historians to organize, discuss, and assess the dimension of ‘culture’ with an eye toward the power relations in society usually bundled together simply as ‘politics’.”⁴

Habermas defined the public sphere as “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed.”⁵ While this included the people gathering to form some type of consensual opinion, his framework described the institution of gathering rather than the individuals themselves as a part of the gathering. The public sphere further existed as a body directing its discussions around and against the state. Because of its assumed right to dialogue and critique the governing power, Habermas asserted that the rise of “public opinion” within the “public sphere” did not, nor could not, emerge until the eighteenth century. “Public opinion can by definition only come into existence when a reasoning public is presupposed.”⁶ With the French Revolution following the American, trans-Atlantic societies began to assume the right to control government via public discourse. The earlier breakdown of church and state in the Reformation and the separation of society into sacred/ secular and private/ public with Enlightenment thinking further encouraged the growth of a separate “public sphere,” which debated issues relating to the governance of all other spheres. Further, Habermas identified “public discussion” as demanding the right of “supervision,” a supervision often conducted under the medium of the burgeoning newspaper culture.⁷

French scholar Roger Chartier built upon Habermas, and approached the development of a critical voice from the perspective of the cultural change in reading practices that

³ It is important to note at this point that Habermas’ theory was originally in reference to Western Europe and not the American experience. However, American historians quickly adopted his paradigm, modifying it slightly, to help explain the American development of public opinion and national consciousness.

⁴ Brooke, “Reason and Passion,” 45.

⁵ Jurgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)”, trans. by Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, *New German Critique*, Vol.), Issue 3 (Autumn, 1974), 49.

⁶ Habermas, “The Public Sphere,” 50.

⁷ Habermas, “The Public Sphere,” 53.

encouraged an attitude of distrust towards tradition and authority. In two of his works, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* and *The Cultural Use of Print in Early Modern France*, Chartier evaluates texts and their influence on notions of subjection and submission, public acceptance and transformation of Enlightenment ideals. His research describes the development of a liberal democratic state through a nuanced description of the interaction between the press and the people in the creation of “public opinion.” One of his main questions is “do books make revolutions”? In specifically looking at the French Revolution, he tests Habermas’ ideas of the public sphere and then elaborates on the role of the literature in creating a democratically minded populace. Interestingly, he does not argue that books themselves created a politicized public, but that the *act* or *technique* of reading changed people’s attitudes. He asserts that “if the French of the late eighteenth century fashioned the Revolution, it is because they had in turn been fashioned by books... those books provided an abstract discourse remote from the practice of daily affairs and a criticism of tradition destructive to authority.”⁸

Not only was print far from text on a page, but for Chartier, print culture was a culture of images and a culture of speech, both of which were tied to the textual word in a synergistic way. Chartier takes a culturally sensitive approach that realizes the translation difficulties between an author’s intent and a reader’s understanding. While, on the one hand, he seeks to downplay the idea that specific ideas create specific actions, while analyzing the *cahiers de doléances of 1789* he admits examples of this transmission. Noting the complexity of such a question, he suggests that what is important to note among textual documents and ideas is the cultural fusion that comes according to life experience and situation. In the end, Chartier argues that the act of reading represents a revolutionary act—not because Montesquieu is enlightening regarding proper governmental structures, but because the *act* of reading empowers the group

⁸ Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 68.

to themselves become critics and judges of Montesquieu as well as of the *ancien regime*. This attitude of critique (assumedly empowering) only increased as religious literature—traditionally venerated—declined.

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* remains the last of the theoretical triumvirate to be discussed. His work—like Chartier's—rests upon Habermas' public sphere ideas. However, rather than discussing changes on the ground, he assumes a larger, broader approach that describes the transformation of small towns concerned only with themselves and those ethnically connected to them to the establishment of large nation-states connected across thousands of miles. Anderson asserts that a thriving market economy created a need for communication that both formalized language and fostered a need for a periodical press to connect businessmen engaged in selling their wares to one another. The market and the press emerged as two different sides of the same coin. They managed to unite ethnic groups into larger nation-states that began imagining themselves as part of a larger economy of individuals who spoke the same language, shared the same commercial goods, and read the same newspaper. Imagined communities of the modern world relied upon a thriving commercial economy of print.⁹

Economies of print and the public sphere serve as two fundamental paradigms helping historians of print situate the rise of a dominant print culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When Chartier argues not for the liberating potential of print because of its *ideas* but because of its sheer *existence* as words read by individuals, he does so not merely from his discoveries in historical manuscripts, but from his embrace of yet another influential theory in print history. Literary reader-response theory that has challenged scholars to not just read what is written but to think about how the written word was understood by historic readers.

⁹ In *The Marketplace of Revolution*, T.H. Breen approaches his exploration of causes of the American Revolution from this same perspective, arguing that the development of mass consumption created a unified culture among Americans. Thus consumption paved the way for creating communication patterns and cultures that enabled Americans from Boston to Williamsburg to unite against Britain.

The influence of these theories becomes clear in works such as *Civil Tongues, Polite Letters*. In this work, literary scholar/ historian David Shields discusses growing confidence in the use of rhetoric by those of all classes, he builds this discovery upon the existence of an environmental factor that facilitated the merging of minds and voices—namely, a form of Habermas’ public sphere.¹⁰ In his insistence that pleasure motivated and not words, Shields agrees with Chartier’s evaluation that *actions* politicize and not mere words. He accepts the linguistic turns emphasizes on reading as a scripted act that could become a political statement in and of itself—not inimically tied to words. Charles Clarke in his detailed discussion of the growth of American presses, also touches on the creation of Anderson’s nation-building linguistic economy. Darlene Levy’s biography of Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linnet and Jeremy Popkin’s article, “The Pre-Revolutionary Origins of Political Journalism,” in *The French Revolution and Intellectual History* follow linguistic theory in emphasizing the radical nature of the *act* of printing. Similar to Chartier’s argument, Popkin holds print/ text responsible for radically destabilizing the existing *Ancien Regime*. He argues that it was not necessarily what was written that created the upheaval, but the nature of the written word.¹¹ For example, Popkin argues that the press’ “time-bound, change-oriented representation of events” encouraged an unsettled atmosphere that later led to Revolutionary fervor among the people. These people had grown accustomed to expecting change because the press consistently highlighted upheaval and transformation in society. Further, he sites Linnet as an example of one whose medium effected more than his message. “What made Linnet the single most important forerunner of the revolutionary press was not so much the explicit content of his message, although that was often radical enough, but rather the manner in which he delivered it.”¹² In his work, *Press, Revolution, and Social Identities in France 1830-1850*, Popkin continues to build his argument for the radicalizing

¹⁰ As discussed later, Shields does critique Habermas’ idea of the public sphere, altering his understanding of its origins and ritualizing it more.

¹¹ Jeremy Popkin, “The Pre-Revolutionary Origins of Political Journalism,” *The French Revolution and Intellectual History*, 133.

¹² Popkin, “The Pre-Revolutionary Origins of Political Journalism,” 127.

nature of the press. Shields, Popkin, Chartier and others agree that manners of presentation and appeal to passion in presentation meant more than carefully rationalized arguments.

Historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth century trans-Atlantic print world have engaged the theories of Habermas, Anderson, and the linguistic turn producing works that both validate these theories and modify it according to the varieties of historical experience. Based on these theoretical bases, it appears easy to assert the liberalizing power of print in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries trans-Atlantic cultures. However, evaluating three significant press histories, Jeremy Black's *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century*, Hannah Barker's *Newspapers, Politics, and English Society, 1695-1855* and John Brewer's *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III*, reveal that the liberalizing influence of the English press still remains a somewhat debated issue.

John Brewer's *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III*¹³ stands as a wonderful interpretive approach towards understanding the role of ideas of party and popular politics during the 1760s. This era proved influential, he argues, for it marked a momentous change away from a narrow view of politics. George III's ideological suspicion of political parties caused him to re-evaluate the political world. His criticism of political structure, Brewer argues, encouraged the development of a more rabid journalism that critiqued government as it argued for parliamentary reform. While Brewer's focus is not solely upon the press, he devotes two carefully argued chapters towards evaluating its impact upon English politics. In these chapters, Brewer discusses the growing maturity of the press and its expansion into the provincial world. Brewer firmly argues that the press produced contention within the political world that both drew a larger group of people into political concerns and caused the government to feel the need to use the institution itself for its own purposes.

Brewer spends a good deal of time discussing causation issues and acknowledging the readership v. literacy v. circulation concerns that many scholars raise. This discussion takes him

¹³ John Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III*

into a line of reasoning similar to Chartier's in that he suggests that the environment in which papers were read and spread was as revolutionary as the actual content in the papers. In particular, he focuses on the coffee houses where newspapers were read and on the many times a newspaper changed hands. One single printed text could reach many more people in eighteenth century England than even might today in twenty-first century America. Brewer argues for a large political culture that rose from environment, as well as from abstract ideas. One of the most substantial blows that the press played in breaking down the separation of state and citizen, he argues, was the fact that the daily, written reporting of the governments actions began to break down the "mystique" surrounding the routines and practices of those governing. This environment was, in good part, shaped by printed and ephemeral text. Interestingly, while the press became a force to be reckoned with by the governed as well as those governing, Brewer argues that it was not seen as a fourth estate or even a permanent part of politics, but a mere passing influence. The surprising sustainability of the press, Brewer suggests radically altered the outlook of the British and went a long way in democratizing English political society. In many ways, Brewer's argument remains very similar to Anderson's in that he argues that the print culture that arose created a national-consciousness among previously splintered groups of people—whether it is division by class or by location.

Hannah Barker, in her work, *Newspapers, Politics, and English Society, 1695-1855*¹⁴ and *Press, Politics and the Public Sphere in England and North American, 1760-1820* takes a slightly broader approach to evaluating the history of the rise and influence of the press on English politics and society. Through her research, she argues that the larger amorphous ideas of English "liberty" became an increasingly powerful rhetorical concept among the middle and upper classes. While her work indicates that she sees ideas as the motivational force behind the press, she also delves into the practical aspects of the press. Her arguments are similar to

¹⁴ Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and English Society, 1695-1855* and *Press, Politics and the Public Sphere in England and North American, 1760-1820*.

Brewer where she cites the growing expansion of the press into the provincial realm and in the numbers of individuals coming into contact with the press. Like Brewer, Barker argues that the growing concern and attention that the government paid to the press indicated its growing power. By far, her most interesting suggestion surrounds her discussion of the *structural* constraints that print placed upon government. Her focus on structure and environment concur with Chartier and Anderson's suggestions that environment factors explain the growth of the power of the press. According to both Barker and Brewer, as a result of print the government was forced to learn a new way to present itself and many times this presentation proved flawed and uncompetitive compared with the more polished journalism of the press.

Jeremy Black's *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* represents the most thorough attempt at comprehensive coverage of the English press in the eighteenth century. Black's work represents a revision of Barker and Brewer as he suggests that the discussion of the impact of the press is exaggerated and ill founded. While he agrees that the press did change and that it "kept its readership in contact with the activities of politicians," he concludes that the press did not attract any *new* readership to newspapers or politics than were already interested. In other words, he suggests that all the press accomplished was to give already politically interested people easier access to political news than they previously had experienced. Democratization or the spread of ideas of political involvement on all levels of society, he suggests, are mere hopeful and ambitious readings of the past. Following E.P. Thompson's division of society into polite and popular culture, Black argues that the newspaper press was a part of the polite (elite) culture, and therefore did not influence the popular culture. As well, when discussing the causative role of the press, he suggests that rather than being a leader of political development he was as much of a responder as an initiator.¹⁵

¹⁵ Black does seem to agree to a certain extent with Chartier that environment played an influential role in the developing political world, but with this he seems to think that the press' involvement in this environment was less assertive or formative. So, while Chartier, Anderson, Barker, and Brewer would suggest that the press formed the environment, which in turn formed the people, Black suggests that

American and French scholars, like the British, debate the cause-effect relationship between print and political action. However, like Barker and Brewer, these press historians tend to see in its history a progressive bent. For scholars of early America this is not surprising, as much of early American print content—at least for newspapers and periodicals—was amassed from English (particularly London) papers. Further, because of the tremendous impact of the American and French Revolutions on world relations, it can be especially tempting to interpret their histories with inflated attention paid to the “development” of the revolutionary mindset. In studying the press, Stephen Botein, Jack Censer, and Harriet Ritvo have identified this predisposition to look for revolutionary fervor. They write, “research patterns have been embedded within a ‘liberal’ understanding of modern society that dwells on the struggles of writers and publishers for freedom from governmental oppression.”¹⁶

In evaluating the impact of the press on the American colonies, Charles Clarke and David D. Hall engage this teleological struggle to see resistance and independence from the very beginning—newspapers shaping colonists into little rebels. Clarke and Hall suggest that while English precedent and provincialism set the foundation and often provided the explicit content for the dynamics of an American press, the colonies themselves influenced the attitudes towards the press, the printers, and the communities in which newspapers were produced. And while they acknowledge the growing unrest of the colonists and the press’ influence in this unrest, both for the most part, resist the urge to define the press solely as a primary causative role in the revolution.

other forms of popular culture—such as tavern culture or the salon’s of the day—existed outside of the impact of the printed word. Interestingly, Black’s distrust of a empowering narrative for print highlights a tension that Popkin relates in his historiographical review of French press scholarship. Both want to argue for the significance of studying print. Yet, as Popkin acknowledges, historians who do not adopt a progressivist attitude towards print often have a hard time explaining why they are spending so much time examining and explaining a historical artifact that their research suggests was less than significant in its time. Jeremy D. Popkin, “The Press and the French Revolution after Two Hundred Years,” *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Spring, 1990), 664-683.

¹⁶ J. Censer, S. Botein, and H. Ritvo, “The Periodical Press in Eighteen-Century English and French Society: A Cross Cultural Approach,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Jul., 1981), 466.

Scholars of the English and American presses defend the idea of a democratizing press by citing the fact that these newspapers appealed to a larger audience of individuals—larger than say the French press exercised. This appeal came as “the periodical press operated within an expansive communications system that made room for people of lower social origins.”¹⁷ Literacy rates played a role in this expansion. In England, during the eighteenth century, the male literacy rate approached approximately 60 percent, while in the colonies it reached as high as 80 percent. Contrast this with the French rate of approximately 40 percent, and one can begin to realize the impact that the press played in the English-speaking world. Hall claims that the literacy rate played a crucial role in helping to keep a large gulf from developing between high and low culture in the colonies. Jeffrey Pasley’s *‘Tyranny of Printers’* builds upon this notion of lower classes being involved in the literate culture. Pasley, while acknowledging less than admirable motivations among printers, strongly suggests that many, if not most, of the printers of the revolutionary and early republic period were motivated by political ideals to print and distribute their papers. Central to his argument is an army of middling printers. Rather than being an elite led phenomena, the emergence of countless presses across America came from the bottom up. Willing to put their financial and personal future on the line, these men printed their way to a huge transfer in power from Federalist and Democratic-Republican.

While the English and American historians tend to favor the democratizing power of the press, voices of caution raise an important issue about the significance of other cultural forms of communication. As mentioned before, Black’s critique of the relative unimpressive influence of the press lay in part, in his belief that other cultural institutions remained influential and that the press did not intrude upon these institutions. Hall and Clarke also touch upon this issue, and the connection it raises between oral and print culture. Hall suggested that the claims that many make as to the large divide between the two worlds just does not exist and are merely over-

¹⁷ J. Censer, et al, “The Periodical Press in Eighteen-Century English and French Society: A Cross Cultural Approach,” 474.

dramatized for historical reaction. Clarke writes, “The mental world that one encountered in the newspapers was not one apart from other expressions of eighteenth-century life and consciousness.... It dignified and made permanent... the daily gossip and worldly concerns that were common to shops and counting-houses, taverns and clubs, wharves and garrisons, legislative halls and council chambers.”¹⁸ While literate individuals were required to translate ideas printed in text to their surrounding listeners, he suggests that images and the advertisements also played an important role in spreading ideas and encouraging community reactions.

As mentioned earlier, Shield’s *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters*, engages this idea of the connection between orality and literacy and between class and rhetoric. Shields’ overview examines the cultural power of private societies and their formative impact on the political world. His exploration takes him into the world of the belle lettres, taverns, spas, coffee houses, colleges, printing houses, etc. He argues that a carefully scripted language emerged from these voluntary organizations that became the formal means of encouraging wider societal discourse and of creating a realm of public opinion that later governed political action. Aesthetics of taste and pleasure dictated the formation of clubs that broke down social barriers and formed new rituals in print and oral discourse. In this work, not only does Shields describe early American communication manners and customs, but he also critiques many of the theories that are currently popular frameworks for interpreting past discourse. His argument is significant, for not only does it critique and challenge Habermas’ notion of a rationally led public sphere, but he also suggests that aesthetics and pursuit of pleasure, as opposed to the sheer medium of print or ideas, led politics forward in mid-to-late eighteenth century America. He provides a different basis for explaining how Habermas’ public sphere emerged. He argues that private societies brought to light the “discursive practices that served as verbal glue for these communities of

¹⁸ Charles E. Clarke, *The Public Prints: The Newspaper in Anglo-American Culture, 1665-1740*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 251.

appetite and feeling.”¹⁹ Habermas had argued that the public sphere was a place where authority and public discoursed. Shields suggests that the private sphere of voluntary organization created the first and necessary part of the public sphere. Not only did this private sphere break down personal barriers but it also created an environment with carefully scripted relationships that encouraged individuals to air their ideas, their complaints, and critiques. Familiar with the rules for engagement within a social venue, individuals entered the public sphere ready to announce their “public opinion.” Shields does an excellent job of critiquing Habermas and questioning the venerated status of print in other historical narratives. In noting this, it is important to note that he does have a liberation narrative. While he does bring oral and ritualized communication into his equation of influence, liberation occurred through communicative action that was, to a certain extent, influenced by text.

In accepting this idea of the revolutionizing nature of print, Shields and Popkin, as well as historian Jack Censer (in his article, “The Public Divided: How Contemporaries Understood Politics in Eighteenth-Century France,”) place a good deal of emphasis on environmental factors that prepared the public for revolutionary activity. Shields argued that the establishment of voluntary organizations (and the texts that helped formalize these institutions) facilitated an environment favorable towards revolutionizing thinking. Popkin and Censer, though not focusing on the emergence of voluntary organizations, note the potentially revolutionary effect of printed texts that preceded the French Revolution of 1789. These texts, they note, created an environment in which people’s thought patterns and activities began to move the citizenry towards a more critical attitude regarding government

Popkin, Censer, and Shields vary in the degree of causation they grant print. According to Shields, print happened to be one method that historical figures used to express their cultural values, but print was not in and of itself revolutionary. What was revolutionary, in Shields mind, was the *way* that people interacted in communal organizations and *why* they pursued these

¹⁹ David Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters*, xvi.

interactions. While Popkin would agree with this, he also highlights how the Revolution in 1789 came as a result of its growing ability to create an “ideologically effective narrative, rather than simply presenting “materials for history.”²⁰ Censer’s goal is to look at what news was shared in order to gain “understanding [into] how it might condition other events.”²¹ Importantly, he notes, “by wending our way through a hierarchy of papers, one can begin to imagine a layered public, possessing very different levels of information.”²² Content, for Censer, affected the participation and activity of individuals in eighteenth century France. In this regard, access to information remains an influential key towards liberalizing individuals.

Shields addresses another important topic related to the “liberating” impact of print when he addresses the idea of the sentimentalization of American culture. Some American scholars, such as Ann Douglas,²³ have argued that the rise of novel and sentimental literature in the nineteenth century spelled the feminization (and hence, in their minds, disintegration) of American culture. Douglas follows Perry Miller, her mentor, in defining the eighteenth century as an era of rigorous pieces of literature filled with solid intellectual thinking. However, Shields seems to suggest that pleasure and fun filled much of the eighteenth century literature as well. His suggestion raises interesting questions about when the rise of sentimental literature, or literature aimed at pleasure reading, emerged and began to influence society and further, how society viewed the pleasurable of political reading.

These historians struggle with a major theoretical issue: are ideas the main power behind the text or is the actual physical act of printing and reading liberalizing? Many cultural historians, default to describing the press as an important cultural institute that participated in in public challenge to dominant hierarchies. This approach focuses upon authority and power, and rhetoric and power and analyzes how they interrelate and challenge one another. As print

²⁰ Popkin, “The Pre-Revolutionary Origins of Political Journalism,” 127.

²¹ Censer, “The Public Divided,” 192.

²² Censer, “The Public Divided,” 192.

²³ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*

material multiplied and circulated beyond the literati or political elite, into the hands of the provincial, shifts in power relationships emerged. An important part of this transmission, scholars such as Cathy Davidson, Roger Chartier, and David Shields argue, was a spreading culture of communal sharing that began to create separate communities outside traditional religious and political structures. As communities merged around shared text, criticism and empowerment to criticize also grew. Historians, such as Ken Cmeil, Miles Orvell, and David Henkin note the importance of a written text as a means of creating or shaking up “reality” for individuals. These historians thus argue that text produced a living synergy that slowly began to awaken something called public consciousness, which existed outside of the traditional institutions of church and state.

In reviewing these works and citing others, it becomes clear that while historians are engaged in a sophisticated exploration of the liberalizing impact of print, they rarely step back to investigate the relationship between text and authority. It seems evident that print played some definable role in the democratization of Western societies. However, in this equation few ask what made individuals willing to make print the center of their public and private conversations. What made those engaged in the public sphere willing to grant newspapers and broadsides the legitimacy of representing some type of formal, credible voice? Individuals did not have to agree with the press, but they certainly gave them enough credence to feel that they needed to respond to its text in one way or another. In citing print as a formative, influential role in the democratization of society, historians have yet to adequately explain how written text assumed such an authoritative position in society that it could produce a democratization that years of an active oral culture did not.

Yin and Yang: The Role of Print and the Market

While many historians assume some form of liberating potential inherent in print—whether it be in the ideas it transfers, the community of sharing it creates, or the mere act of reading—historians favor interpretations of print as democratizing. Another arena of historical

debate and exploration is print's contested relationship to the market economy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Neo-Marxian historians are developing sophisticated arguments and interesting relationships in their explorations of print and its relationships to the market. Within this rising group of scholars, the works produced can be divided into two broad categories. First, are those who address the issue from a cultural perspective that define the market in terms beyond mere cash equivalency. These scholars tend to address issues of authority of expression and artistic rendering versus consumeristic production. The second general category of historians describes those who have taken a more sociological and statistical approach looking at advertising versus content ratios, development of newspaper coverage alongside advertising expansion, etc. Both sets of historians provide nuanced and carefully crafted arguments that suggest the relationship between print and the market is not easily defined.

Benjamin Franklin's attitude towards currency provides a good representative of the discussions that cultural historians interested in the print and market have about the interactions of these two entities. The man of letters himself, Franklin stands as an important figure who seemed to understand the marketability of language and also the slight of hand by which disembodied print could authorize action that embodied men could not. Michael Warner stands as one of the prominent scholars addressing Franklin's prescient understanding of the power of print across the trans-Atlantic. "Franklin's career as a republic statesman centers on an inescapable difficulty: while the statesman's task is to embody legitimate power, the task of republicanism was to take legitimacy out of the hands of person."²⁴ In order to retain this power, yet under the guise of the disinterested and objective guide, print assumed authority and power in society. "The calculating rationality for which Franklin is famous, I would suggest, should be seen as part of a project of supplanting speech and immediacy with writing and generality."²⁵ Warner argues the written word assumed a growing power in the economy of power relations.

²⁴ Michael Warner, "Franklin and the Republic of Letters," 110.

²⁵ Warner, "Franklin and Republic of Letters," 115.

Further, in his book, *Letters of the Republic*, Warner fleshes out his argument of the power shift that printed text commanded. Interestingly this work stands as a critical judgment of the many historians who see in print a democratizing potential. “The West treasures few moments in its history the way it treasures the story of the democratization of print. In the century proceeding the American and French revolutions, men of letters commonly linked the spread of letters to the growth of knowledge.”²⁶

Scholar Grantland Rice critiques and develops Warner’s use of Franklin by examining Franklin’s use of print from a more explicitly market perspective. He describes a different “historical trajectory by which a viable civic literary culture in early America dissolved, and ... an embattled tradition of civic authorship was institutionalized and privatized alongside the consolidation of economic man.”²⁷ Rice highlights how Franklin believed print established market relations between writers and texts.²⁸ “For Franklin, ‘the circulation of printed texts mirrored that of money,’ (which was itself a printed textual document) and this produced ‘a wide register of similarities between Franklin’s understanding of money and commerce and his philosophy of print and textual circulation.’”²⁹ Rice argues that the Puritan notions of authorship and text had dominated the American colonies until Franklin’s time. He claims, and in doing so stands in the company of scholars such as Perry Miller, that the Puritan culture saw reading as intimately connected to socio-political actions. Words from authoritative sources demanded certain reactions and actions. However, Rice argues that the marketplace of the eighteenth century disrupted this relationship. Franklin stands as one of the first men who understood the consumeristic nature of text and its close connection to a market economy of supply and demand.

²⁶ Warner, *Letters of the Republic*, ix.

²⁷ Grantland Rice, *The Transformation of Authorship in America*, 23.

²⁸ Rice, *The Transformation of Authorship*, 51.

²⁹ Grantland Rice, “Modern Chivalry and the Resistance to Textual Authority,” *American Literature* Volume 67, No. 2 (June, 1995), 49-51.

As further proof of his interpretation, Rice analyzes the writings of other novelists at the time. Relying heavily upon Hugh Henry Breckenridge, he argues that these authors saw in operation in society a “republican print ideology, a body of beliefs about the rationality of print which engendered ... immutable texts as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.” Rice suggests that Breckenridge wrote his works to “warn the public against the manipulative power of print and to chastise society for its gullibility and blind appetite for sensationalism... Brackenridge cautioned his readership about the conventionalizing power of an emerging print culture industry—an industry fueled by economic forces as well as by the philosophical imperatives of republican print ideology—and attempted to disrupt its persuasive and pervasive logic of material, formal, and ideological uniformity.”³⁰ The heart of Rice’s argument is that he sees Breckenridge as identifying his generation’s fears about losing authorial control and reader incisiveness because of the all-consuming powers of an emergent consumerism. Rice suggests that Breckenridge most seriously feared a technological hegemony.

[Breckenridge’s novel] explores the tension ... in democratic-capitalistic societies between artistic meaning and textual or extra textual signs which convey the meaning, between the work of art as a source of ‘transcendent’ meaning and its signs, which, in addition to carrying content, are leveled in the process of mass reproduction and made to advertise ‘the pleasure about to be derived from the product, so that the work of art sinks to the level of consumer goods in general... he feared the power of a democratic print culture ... to consolidate a coercive public opinion and was anxious that such a consensus would stifle the critical individualism that made a liberal republic philosophically if not practically viable.”³¹

Rice does not limit his argument to Breckenridge’s complaints. He sites Tocqueville and even Fisher Ames, in their suspicion of the rising newspaper market economy. De Tocqueville noted the loss of the individual in an emerging mass print culture. And, in an essay written in 1801, Fisher Ames questioned if “‘newspaper wares were made to suit the market’ rather than to inform the public. ‘Pray tell us, men of ink,’ he proclaimed, ‘if our free presses are to diffuse

³⁰ Rice, “Modern Chivalry and the Resistance to Textual Authority,” 258.

³¹ Rice, “Modern Chivalry and the Resistance to Textual Authority,” 258.

information, and we, the poor ignorant people, can get it no other way than by newspapers, what knowledge we are to glean from the blundering lies, or the tiresome truths about thunderstorms.”³²

Rice’s argument, while very explicitly connected to issues of authority, stands in the tradition of much modern cultural scholarship on the nineteenth century. He, inadvertently perhaps, joins Ann Douglas’ condemnation of the rise of economic influence on texts as an inherently degenerating process. Douglas attaches women’s literature to mass-market forces, suggesting that women responded to economic factors in order to participate in a culture from which they were politically and socially restricted. She contrasts their “pulp” fiction with “serious writers”—such as Hawthorne and Melville—who attempted to “re-educate, defy, and ignore a public addicted to the absorption of sentimental fare.” Douglas’ analysis categorizes women’s writings as overly sentimental, weak-minded, feminine focused productions that offer little to the growth of intellectualism or cultural strength. Women’s writings represent consumerism that agrees to remain ineffective culturally, to encourage male hegemony, and to spur a growing trend towards anti-intellectualism.

Disagreeing with Douglas’ interpretation of the role of the market in the development of literature, Jane Tompkins’s work challenges Douglas assumed dichotomy between serious and sentimental literature. She challenges the modern notion of a fixed “canon” of authoritative literary works that express transcendent values. Instead, she argues that literature represents as well as forms culture at a specific time and place. In this she agrees with Larry Levine’s conclusion in *High Brow/ Low Brow*, that literary distinction is a class construction that is an economically motivated defense mechanism. While many different conclusions could be teased out in this debate, what remains of import is the assumption of the formative nature of the market and its almost indecipherable connection with print.

³² Rice, “Modern Chivalry and the Resistance to Textual Authority,” 260.

Taking this argument one step further, historians such as Karen Haltunnen, James Cook, and Kenneth Cmiel, argue that individuals were increasingly shaped by a market that prodded them further away from orality and more and more into the world of the symbol or representation—be it text or image. It is overstating the process to say that newspapers and the economy turned Americans from keen intellectuals into naive victims. Much has been written about the distrustful relationship between the people and their press. Haltunnen's work, for example, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, explores this world of middle class insecurity and their use of signs as a way to try and play the part they feel they need to play to protect their existence. She specifically argues that a society consumed with fear of hypocrisy reassured itself through instituting "sincere" etiquette, dress, and even burial rituals. She indicates that sentimentalism was the reaction to a society groaning with expansion and impersonality. Sentimental culture, and the rise of rituals that came with it, were a way for women to create class while denying its existence. What is interesting in this construction is the centrality of the consumption of print in this equation. Print created the rituals that enabled the creation of class, which created the culture of security that middle class women sought.³³ In the end, she reveals the power that published texts played in forming and transforming and, one might even argue, deforming middle class rituals and lifestyle.

Kenneth Cmiel's, *Democratic Eloquence* suggests that the democratization process, that supposedly denuded rhetoric (in line with Douglas and Rice's arguments), far from destroying elite control of speech, slowly transferred its power from a historic aristocratic elite to a modern technocratic one. Cmiel highlights America's greatest loss as being the splintering of language into spheres that keep people isolated. Class plays a large role in the early formation of the separation of rhetoric. While it may have been expressed more clearly in economic terms in the nineteenth century, in modern times, this division comes through less clear, yet equally isolating

³³ It is interesting to note Haltunnen's choice of sources. Like Douglas, while she wants to subscribe power to women, also seems to imply—by her source usage—that men were the real players in both the print and consumer culture.

methods of specialization or educational levels that divide. His argument as well as Haltunnens', influenced by neo-Marxist constructions, reveals the contested nature of discourse not only in what is said by whom, but *how* it is said by whom.

Another avenue cultural historians of consumerism and print follow is the tension it between the idea of the real versus the representation in textual presentation. James Cook argues that nineteenth century Americans delighted in the idea of textual trickery and how to outwit it. Miles Orvell's *The Real Thing* also explores this desire of Americans to play with ideas of authentic versus crafted. Categories of authentic verses crafted, of real verses representative played into middle class definitions that sought to elevate their status in the creation of roles they could play. Once again, they means they used to codify their status was the world of textual sources. David Henkin notes, though, that historians such as Cook and Orvell cite the primacy of a visual culture based around texts without really concentrating on the actual written text. He argues that by focusing on the hidden meanings or motives behind advertisements and newspaper articles, they are missing out on what is explicitly stated. He argues that currently all signs and symbols have become "texts" to be decoded by scholars. This trend has caused the actual written word to be lost and hence, a whole subset of clues about how people understand life is left understudied. Regardless of how one is deconstructing the text, Henkin, Orvell, Cook and other cultural historians assume the central role of the market in creating text. Behind textuality and imagery, for many scholars, the market looms as the main causation for change and influence.

While these historians take the economic argument from a much more culturally informed perspective, other historians have assumed a more sociological and statistical approach. Stephen Botein, for example, argued that printers, especially American colonial printers, remained pure businessmen—interested in using a new medium to make a profit, especially those interested in making a profit by creating public reaction. Jeremy Popkin cautiously agrees with Botein's argument. In his work, *Revolutionary News: The Press in*

France, 1789-1799 while discussing the nature of ideas in the press, he admits that economic motivations often directed the content of the French press. The main market for the eighteenth and nineteenth century press was the burgeoning middle class of merchants and government officials. Printers were not just ideologues. In fact they were much more than that. They were publicists in search of a loyal audience. As they searched for this loyal audience, they would tailor their papers to appeal to these people. Popkin, even though a tremendous supporter of the notion of the revolutionary impact of the press, admits that printers were much more concerned with the economics of selling papers than with advancing certain ideological strain. Likewise, Jack Censer, in his book *The French Revolution in the Age of Enlightenment* argued that while the *affiches* appear devoid of politically threatening materials that they “managed to eat away at the socio-economic system of the Old Regime by tacitly assuming that the price of things was ultimately more important than rank and status.” This competition between mass consumerism and established hierarchy in the press downplayed and even sidelined the privileged elite and established new rules for conduct and power relationships.

Gerald Baldastay argues in his work, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century*, that “In the early nineteenth century, editors saw their readers primarily as voters; by century’s end, readers were seen primarily as consumers, although newspapers continued to provide at least a modicum of political news.”³⁴ He notes that, what he calls “metropolitan” papers, set aside a good half of their editorials to politics in the early nineteenth century. However, it was less than a quarter by the centuries close. He concludes by arguing that newspapers moved by being “an instrument of citizenship and political discourse into a commercialized ‘cafeteria of information [that] contained something for everyone’.”³⁵ Society had accepted the idea that part of their political rights included the right to consume. He notes that the rise of commercialism and consumerism dictated the contents of the papers. More diversity

³⁴ Gerald Baldastay, *The Commercialization of News in the Nineteenth Century*, 122.

³⁵ Baldastay, *The Commercialization of News*, 122.

was wanted to attract more advertisers. And as department stores entered the world of consumerism they in turn once again affected the nature of newspaper advertising.

This scholarship also links the development of Victorian ideals of womanhood and the home with developing advertising strategies. No longer did the newspapers primarily aim to sell political action. The money making lay in convincing housewives that they needed to purchase certain elements in order to make their homes the true havens they needed to be. Michael Schudson's works on the history of newspapers argues that "the penny papers made their way in the world by seeking large circulation and the advertising it attracted, rather than by trusting to subscription fees and subsidies from political parties. This rationalized the economic structure of newspaper publishing."³⁶

Returning to England and Hannah Barker, her works, while highlighting the democratizing processes of print also discuss the legal and economic issues that eased the press' relationship to government and hence to the public. She argues for the significance of economic motivations in her discussion of taxes on papers and the eventual lifting of those taxes as paving the way for papers to become more prominent and plentiful. Charles Clarke notes, that especially in comparison with the Parisian press, the English outstripped all foreign competition. American printers learned from their English counterparts, taking on many of the practices, and certainly copying much of the text from established London gazetteers, etc. Like English newspapers, American papers became increasingly concerned with consumerism—or more focused on the market impact of the press than on its political or diplomatic influence.

Popkin, this time in his work, *Press, Revolution, and Social Identities in France, 1830-1835* traces yet another connection between the market and the press. Popkin builds upon Habermas by expanding the "public sphere" notion to include workers. And the press, rather than just uniting people into a public voice, creates a unifying voice among laborers who assumed a collective identity through a collective voice in print. He relies as well upon

³⁶ Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 18.

Anderson's claim that the press created nation-states, as individuals otherwise unable to connect, imagine themselves involved in simultaneously partaking of the same news. This idea of an imaginative public sphere, where a man in his house can imagine those on the other side of the country doing exactly what he is doing, and responding exactly as he is responding, forged identities. However, as Habermas and Anderson note, this development could not have taken place had it not been for the economic demand for print. In many regards, Anderson and Habermas see the press and the market as reflections of one another, rather than two separate entities. Michael Schudson describes this economic connection well, when he writes, "The penny papers themselves contributed directly to the extension of the market in two ways. First, they made advertisements more available to more people and so enlarged the potential market for manufactured goods. Second, they transformed the newspaper from something to be borrowed or read at a club or library to a product one bought for home consumption."³⁷

While the scholarship of historians such as Jack Censer, Hannah Barker, Ann Douglas, Cathy Davidson, Jurgen Habermas, Benedict Anderson, and others reveals the substantial impact of the market on the press, their scholarship raises questions surrounding the relationship between print and government, the government and the market, and the market and print. For example, is print always a threat to the governing authorities, regardless of how free or censored? What is the difference between print and the market and are these artificial categories? Is print a mere reflection of the government or the public or somewhere in between? How does it operate as a communicator in the public sphere between perceived authorities? Once again this issue leads to the question of authority. Does print gain influence and legitimacy because it rides on the back of economic development? Is it accepted because it contributes to an increasingly accepted mass consumerism? Few historians explore this question, instead subsuming print's role under that of economic and competitive terms.

³⁷ Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 46.

Conclusion

Modern historiography is engaged in an important debate over the nature of print and its connection to democratic development and economic markets. Influenced by key theorists also engaged in seeking to construct paradigms that describe behavior and cause/effect relationships across time, these historians provide sophisticated explanations for the development of mass print communication in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While it appears that historians may be overly optimistic when describing the development of the press, they also acknowledge key interactions between the press and revolutionary moments. Equally true are the direct connections between the press and the market.

While answers may appear elusive, what remains key are some of the questions that such studies bring up. In looking at the questions these studies raise, it becomes apparent that historians have yet to adequately address the issue of authority and print. Few have addressed questions related to who has the right to publish? How does a published source gain authority in the public's eye—especially if it is separate from traditional sources of authority such as the state or the church? What was the role of the author in the eighteenth and nineteenth century and did the author lose control as the market gained ascendancy? How are people manipulated by texts/ by the markets that publish texts? Where is the line between facilitating and hindering print and authorial development? Those engaged in print history would do well to address these issues of authority. Not only is this issue significant in understanding how printed texts were understood in the past, but an exploration of such a question helps historians question their motives for accepting or rejecting textual documents they must interact with on a daily basis.

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