

THE CREATION OF THE MEDIA

*Political Origins of
Modern Communications*

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A Member of the Perseus Books Group
New York

CHAPTER ONE

Early Modern Origins

COMMUNICATIONS in Europe and America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries underwent a radical transformation, but not because of any revolution in communications technology. A printer from the 1500s magically catapulted into a print shop of the late 1700s would have found hand-operated, wooden presses little altered from his own time.¹ Viewed from the standpoint of social practices, politics, and institutions, however, the change in communications was enormous. Europe and its American colonies saw the introduction of regular, publicly available postal service; the first newspapers, scientific journals, and other periodicals appeared and, along with them, journalism emerged in its earliest forms. Commercial expansion, religious conflict, and the rise of more powerful nation-states altered the economic and political context of communications. While states generally sought to control information, they were not entirely successful; internal conflicts and the structure of the international system permitted more autonomous forms of communication even before free expression received legal protection. The market for print expanded, and the law of intellectual property began to take its modern shape. Most important, out of these developments a new sphere of public information, public debate, and public opinion emerged.

What was this new public sphere? Part of the difficulty in defining it lies in the ambiguity of the word "public." In one sense, public is to private as open is to closed, as when we speak of making something public. In another sense, public is to private as the whole is to the part, as when we speak of the public health or public interest, meaning the health or

interest of the whole of the people as opposed to that of a class or individual.² The term "public sphere" combines both senses when conceived (as it will be here) as the sphere of openly accessible information and communication about matters of general social concern.³

Before 1600, the sheer underdevelopment of communications networks impeded flows of information and the development of a public sphere. To be sure, news and other information circulated by word of mouth, via privately carried letters and scribal publications, through ballads relating current events, and in occasional pamphlets and other printed works, but the absence of postal service and periodicals such as newspapers presented severe limitations. Regular means of exchange and publication provide not only a stream of fresh information but also the opportunity to respond to events as they unfold, to engage in the back-and-forth of debate, and to sustain relationships and affiliations. Publications weave invisible threads of connection among their readers. Once a newspaper circulates, for example, no one ever truly reads it alone. Readers know that others are also seeing it at roughly the same time, and they read it differently as a result, conscious that the information is now out in the open, spread before a public that may talk about the news and act on it.⁴ Without a regular flow of communication, it is difficult to develop this sense of a public that extends beyond the limits of a local, face-to-face community.

Not only did European societies before 1600 lack the necessary communication networks for a public sphere; there were also normative and political barriers to its formation. Under the prevailing principles of political communication, ordinary people were not properly concerned with government; according to an English royal proclamation drafted by Francis Bacon in 1620, matters of state were "not themes or subjects fit for vulgar persons or common meetings." The privilege of discussing politics belonged exclusively to the few who could speak in government councils, and these discussions were supposed to be confidential. In England it was a crime to divulge parliamentary proceedings. The norms of discussion and decision-making in Parliament itself were also consensual rather than adversarial; open disagreements and organized political alignments were avoided. The development of the public sphere required the breakdown of "norms of secrecy and privilege" and the open acknowledgment and acceptance of political differences.⁵

In short, if a public sphere was to emerge—and no inexorable force of progress dictated that it would—two conditions had to be met: the creation of a new network infrastructure and the collapse of old norms, if not the

fashioning of new ones. The rise of capitalism, with attendant increases in the circulation of commodities and information, contributed particularly to overcoming the infrastructural barriers. Markets themselves are information networks, and expanding commerce opened up new channels of communication. As printing and bookselling developed, information itself increasingly became a commodity. "One fact must not be lost sight of: the printer and the bookseller worked above all and from the beginning for profit," write Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin of the early history of the book in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁶ Continually searching for new markets, printers and booksellers extended distribution networks and enlarged the reading public. In a variety of ways, state policy also created the bases of the public sphere. States reduced the infrastructural barriers to communications by developing roads and postal systems. Traditionally patrons of the sciences and sponsors of learned academies and publications as they sought to centralize power in its symbolic as well as material forms.⁷

But neither the rise of capitalism nor state-building guaranteed a change in norms of secrecy about governmental proceedings or the development of openly accessible channels of public discussion. Ruling elites not only exercised direct control of print through censorship and surveillance but also sought to shape the organization of the book trade and the press to ensure that the dominant interests in publishing were aligned with those of the state. In the early phases of development (until 1695 in England and 1789 in France), states pursued this objective by granting privileges and monopolies to a limited number of favored printers and booksellers, who then shared the state's interest in suppressing illegal publications. Later, high taxes and other costs imposed on publishers by the state helped to limit the popular press. Since state policies both fostered and inhibited the public sphere, the role of the state does not lend itself to a simple generalization. If states had always been coherent, systematic, and effective, they might have created a sphere only of official ideology. But because their domination was far from single-minded and complete, something else was possible.

The Diffusion and Control of Print

The advent of printing around 1450 is the paradigmatic example of change in information technology, yet it was equally a change in economic organization. The production of manuscripts had been characteristically

monastic function, though commercial stationers in the later stages of the manuscript era began to produce and sell hand-copied books in quantities of up to several hundreds.⁸ Had monasteries remained dominant in the era of the movable-type press, they would not have had the same incentives as commercial printers to expand the uses of print, and the technology might not have had the effects so widely attributed to it. But from the time of Gutenberg, printing was organized commercially, and as the technology spread, so did a capitalist framework in the book trade.

Publishing was associated with capitalism in part because the industry itself was a prime instance of capitalist development. It took considerable capital to finance not only the equipment in a shop but also the paper and other costs of production while awaiting sales, which were often slow in coming. The dependence on capital drew printing to cities where finance was available and created pressures to adapt the physical and cultural form of the book to wider markets. The earliest printed books, like the manuscripts that served as their models, were large, cumbersome folios written in Latin primarily for the clergy, the universities, and high officials. Printers and others acting as publishers had incentives, however, to find new texts they could sell, to bring them out in more portable sizes (the printed book was the original laptop), and to simplify typefaces and other elements to improve readability. Thus, the early book trade became divided between weighty volumes for the learned and "small-size literary or polemical works for a larger public."⁹ Print could reach a wider public than manuscripts had because of lower costs; by 1470, according to one estimate, the same text cost between 50 percent and 80 percent less in print than in manuscript.¹⁰ Nonetheless, in early modern Europe, the market for print comprised only a small fraction of the population because of the limits of both literacy and income, as well as high distribution costs due to the primitive condition of transport and communication.

Religious ideas and conflict contributed to the spread of print culture in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Beginning in 1517 in Germany, the Protestant Reformation unleashed a tremendous surge in printing for two separate reasons. First, it set in motion a process that would later be repeated many times: the antagonistic expansion of a medium. Protestant leaders regarded the printing press as a means of propagating the truth and created their own presses to disseminate their beliefs; theirs was the first transformative movement in history spread, to a large extent, through the vehicle of print. With the Counter-Reformation beginning around 1570,

Catholics also turned to the press; in the antagonistic expansion of a medium, even the reluctant side in a conflict has no other choice but to adopt more powerful means of persuasion. Second, by calling on the faithful to read the Bible, Protestantism elevated the importance of literacy. The effort to incorporate reading into everyday lay religious practice was halting at first, but in the seventeenth century it gathered force with Pietism in Germany and Puritanism in England.¹¹ The positive association of Protestantism and economic development probably also contributed to the more rapid growth of literacy rates and the book trade in Protestant areas.¹²

Both the economic and the religious forces in the growth of printing helped to shape the international map of print. The geographically dispersed demand for books led to the early development of an international book trade; in the sixteenth century, fairs at Lyons and Frankfurt became important venues for the traffic in print. From its infancy, publishing was cosmopolitan, and a division of labor developed between the center and periphery of the trade. The early centers of publishing in Germany, Italy, and Holland dominated the production of texts in Latin that were originally the chief articles of international exchange, while publishers in the periphery specialized in the vernacular. England, which fell on the periphery of the European economy when William Caxton introduced printing in 1476, exemplified the pattern. Since continental printers could supply tomes in Latin more cheaply, the first printers in England concentrated on legal and literary texts in English.¹³

Religious conflict added another dimension to center-periphery relationships. As states and established churches sought to restrict heretical publications, they drove dissenters to other countries. The flight of the Huguenots from France in the late seventeenth century contributed to Holland's role as a center of Protestant publishing; similarly, English dissenters went across the channel to Holland to have their work printed. Extraterritorial publishers, moreover, found a market for the books and journals they produced all over Europe. Amsterdam became a center of Jewish publishing also because of an influx of refugees. As the lingua franca of the "republic of letters" changed from Latin to French in the seventeenth century, the Netherlands became a center of French-language publishing beyond the reach of the French state.¹⁴ The development of such extraterritorial and transnational publishing complicated the efforts of states to control the printed word. It meant that rulers faced two distinct tasks: controlling domestic printers and regulating the influx of print across their borders.

Although some governments had originally sought to attract printers in the late 1400s, the policing of print became a focus of state interest in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Control eventually extended across the entire sequence of activities, from the initial production or importation of texts through their distribution, and involved both religious and secular authorities. In 1543, the Catholic Church banned all books except those that had its approval, and in 1559 it issued its first Index of Forbidden Books. The long-run trend, however, in Protestant and Catholic countries alike, was toward centralized control in the hands of the state. Through several steps culminating in a proclamation in 1538, Henry VIII established a licensing system for all books in English. During the sixteenth century, the English government also prosecuted those responsible for troublesome publications on such grounds as treason, heresy, and “false news” concerning the magnates of the realm (*Scandalum Magnatum*), though licensing proved the most efficient means of control. In a series of measures in France between 1535 and 1551, the king banned all books except those approved by censors and prohibited the importation of books from Protestant countries. Absolutism regarded censorship as a royal prerogative and open political debate as unthinkable, although the practice of censorship was often less systematic than the theory and law suggested.¹⁵

A key feature of policy in both England and France was the alignment of the dominant groups in the trade with the aims of the state. The control of any industry is likely to be more effective when enforcement becomes endogenous—that is, when those who run the industry have strong incentives to make state policy their own. This was the effect of state-granted monopolies and privileges in printing. In England, the Company of Stationers received a charter from the crown in 1557 that conferred on its members the exclusive right to own a press. Since the members of the company had to be freemen of London, this provision effectively kept printing centralized in the capital, an arrangement preferred by the government because it facilitated censorship. A series of other measures up through 1586 also had the purpose of limiting access to the press to a small number of people whom the government considered reliable. The charter vested the company with powers of search and seizure in pursuit of unlicensed books, and further state decrees strengthened its role in enforcing censorship.¹⁶ In effect, the Stationers helped to carry out state censorship in exchange for monopoly privileges; indeed, repressive measures by the state sometimes originated in pressures from

the Stationers to extinguish competitors. Although individual printers might gain by producing unlicensed work, the company as a whole had an economic interest in suppressing competition that matched the crown's political interest in suppressing unlicensed print.

In 1559 the Stationers adopted a rule requiring members to register a work ("copy") with the company in order to enjoy an exclusive right to print it; this rule gave the company's members the sole ability to make the written word their own property. The Stationers thereby turned the regulatory authority entrusted to them into a system of property rights. These rights were understood to be perpetual, not lapsing, like later copyright, after some fixed period. From early in the 1500s, the crown had also awarded a series of monopolies to various London printers over specific classes of books. These "patents" covered such categories as legal texts, Bibles, almanacs, and grammars and became lucrative sources of income to the leading printers while also, like the Stationers' charter, promoting the centralization of publishing in London and thereby facilitating censorship. The patents gradually came under the control of the dominant members of the Stationers' Company, and in 1603 many of the existing patents were merged together and incorporated as the English Stock; all shares were held by members of the Stationers, most of them by the company's inner circle. The creation of the English Stock strengthened oligarchic control of the industry.¹⁷

Likewise, in France an absolutist state sought to make censorship endogenous to the book trade. Louis XIV's ministers adopted policies favoring a small group of printers in Paris, ruining smaller printers in the capital and destroying the centers of provincial publishing; the state followed the same policy toward the paper industry, concentrating production so as to monitor the flow of supplies to printers more effectively. The architects of centralized state power in France thereby imprinted a centralized structure on French publishing. Like the Stationers' Company, the Paris Book Guild accumulated monopolies over the most profitable classes of legal, religious, educational, and literary works and could therefore be counted on to help police the realm of print against illegal intruders. By virtue of the texts it monopolized, the guild's economic interests were closely tied to France's official culture. As in England, those with dissident ideas did not merely confront state censorship; they faced an entire literary and cultural system that spanned the state, the dominant cultural institutions, and the publishing industry.¹⁸

Despite the entrenched power of this system, it did not fully succeed in limiting access to information and proscribed ideas. The system drove critics and dissenters to develop clandestine or extraterritorial capacities for publishing and disseminating their work. It led authors to use what Annabel Patterson calls "functional ambiguity" to pass the censors in licensed publications.¹⁹ And it helped to sustain a manuscript culture long into the age of the printing press. Precisely because print was regulated, many writers felt they had more freedom in manuscript and often deliberately chose to circulate their work in that form. Manuscript literature also continued to circulate because of the "stigma of print," the disdain for publicity and commercialism that lingered among poets and other writers into the seventeenth century.²⁰ One aspect of this persistent scribal culture was manuscript news, which characteristically took the form of handwritten newsletters.

Yet while potential targets of censorship used these evasive techniques, they did so at a cost. Clandestine publishing carried risks of discovery and punishment, and the necessary precautions limited dissemination. Indirect and ambiguous language limited accessibility to readers in a different way. And manuscript literature, by its nature, was more expensive than print and therefore less accessible to the public. States in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries may not have had the capacity or the determination to enforce censorship systematically, but the risks and burdens they imposed by episodic enforcement were sufficient to hamper the development of a public sphere. Indeed, while they might fail to block the circulation of individual forbidden books or pamphlets, states proved to have more control over a new institution of peculiar importance to the public sphere—newspapers.

Networks and News

The development of newsletters, as the term itself suggests, was closely related to the growth of postal service. The late medieval world had seen the emergence of private mercantile networks that were channels for postal communication. In the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, several private postal networks were created, and one of these, run by the Thurn and Taxis family initially under the sponsorship of the Hapsburg emperor, expanded until it linked together much of Europe, at its peak employing 20,000 couriers. Although parts of the Thurn and Taxis net-

work lasted for centuries—in the Low Countries until 1794, and in parts of Germany until 1866—the more enduring postal services developed directly under state authority. The French postal system dates from the late 1400s, the English from 1516, though in both cases these initial services were established only for official use and had limited reach. Nonetheless, by the early 1600s the French and English authorities realized that by opening the post to the public, while maintaining it as a monopoly, they could pay for its cost and, not incidentally, keep their opponents under surveillance. Gradually, both France and England began putting postal communication on a modern basis—that is, with service on regular schedules, open to the public at large, and linked to networks in other countries. In the 1620s, the English post connected with the Thurn and Taxis network on the continent.²¹

Postal networks supported the creation of news networks. By 1600, there were correspondents exchanging economic and political intelligence across Europe, though direct access to such information was limited primarily to merchants, bankers, diplomats, and nobles. Commodity price currents (listing the prices of commodities trading on local markets) and exchange rate currents (giving rates for buying and selling foreign bills of exchange) were being published in major commercial centers by the late 1500s, beginning in Italy; surviving copies of the commodity price currents date from the 1580s, but some evidence suggests that these forerunners of financial news publications began forty years earlier.²² A handwritten periodical referred to as a *gazette* circulated in Venice around 1550; surviving copies suggest that by 1556, one such newsheet was appearing weekly, but it is unclear whether it was publicly available.²³ People living in a capital often included news in private letters to their kin or patrons in the provinces. Out of this practice evolved commercial newsletters, or *nouvelles à la main*, distributed through the mails and passed from hand to hand all over Europe. In London by the late 1500s, commercial newswriters were providing an “aristocratic news service,” sometimes to as many as a hundred or more clients. Typically addressed to a gentleman in the country, scribal newsletters reported events in chronological order, usually in a sentence or two. Though in some ways antecedents of newspapers, the newsletters did not carry essays and arguments to sway their readers’ opinions, nor did they purport to speak for the public.²⁴ Pamphlets and books served as the primary means of carrying on political and religious argument. The sixteenth century also saw the appearance of printed notebooks and broadsides promoting political

events of major importance. In Cologne in 1594, a volume of mainly military news, *Mercurius Gallobelgicus*, began appearing on a semi-annual basis, earning it the designation of the first news periodical, but a semi-annual volume in Latin plainly belongs to a different species from the newspaper. With these qualified exceptions, if news was printed before 1600, it wasn't periodical; and if it was periodical, it wasn't printed.²⁵

The first publicly available reports of sundry recent events printed regularly on at least a weekly basis—in other words, the first newspapers, by at least one definition—appeared in Europe around the turn of the seventeenth century. Strasbourg and Wolfenbüttel may have had the first printed newspapers in 1609; within the next decade, there were weeklies in Basel, Frankfurt, Vienna, Hamburg, Berlin, Amsterdam, and Antwerp.²⁶ The first newspaper to appear in London came from Amsterdam in 1620; printed in English, it carried foreign news that had been translated from Dutch corantos. By 1622, English publishers began regularly issuing corantos under licenses from the crown that permitted them only to carry foreign news.²⁷ When two papers appeared in Paris in 1631, the king conferred a monopoly on the one published by Théophraste Renaudot, a physician, social reformer, and court favorite, who had created an information-exchange bureau in Paris. Authorized to publish both domestic and foreign news, Renaudot's *Gazette* became the official organ of the state.²⁸

The appearance of newspapers in the same period in so much of Europe suggests how closely interconnected its economic and communication networks had become. The advent of newspapers, like the book trade, was related to the rise of capitalism, but there was a critical economic difference between books and newspapers. While books made publishers thirsty for capital because of slow returns on investment, newspapers were typically cheaper to print and sold by subscription payable in advance. Newspapers did not need infusions of capital so much as a continually refreshed supply of their distinctive raw material: news. The growth of trade and markets helped to make that supply possible. Expanding markets increased the appetite for information about the wider world—the predominance of foreign news in early papers is a telling sign of reader interests—while simultaneously creating channels for the flow of news and new possibilities for disseminating it. “The newspaper depends upon its own special lines of communication, inward and outward, bringing information to it and taking the printed copies to the readers,” writes Anthony Smith. “These lines of supply were laid down over many generations, but seemed to ‘jell’ suddenly and simultaneously

over a vast terrain at the beginning of the seventeenth century."²⁹ The spread of newspapers from one country to another was itself a network phenomenon: Much of the content of individual papers consisted of news items taken from other papers, thanks to the emerging international postal network. As newspapers put information into public circulation, they made it easier for printers elsewhere to duplicate their enterprise. Or, if we think of the newspapers themselves as forming a communications network, the more "nodes" transmitting information, the more any individual paper could offer at little extra cost to itself.

As with other forms of print, the state played a shaping role in the development of newspapers. Newspapers could be especially dangerous to authority because of the immediacy and potential political sensitivity of news; they also seemed an affront and a vulgarity to some guardians of custom and social prerogative who upheld the traditional norms of privilege in political communication. What business did newspaper readers have knowing about things that did not concern them? Writing about the traditional norms of secrecy and privilege in England, David Zaret points to an "inverse relationship" between access and substantive discourse: "Access was greatest for purely symbolic displays of sovereign authority, least so for modes of communication that featured substantive discussions and debates."³⁰ When newspapers first appeared, they were heavily censored, if not shut down entirely; those that were permitted to develop were primarily court gazettes, founded to monopolize the news and to report and celebrate the ceremonial life of the court. In other words, they extended the display of authority rather than the substantive discussion of politics. Political news was generally from abroad; domestic news consisted primarily of lurid, strange, or miraculous reports. The model for the newspaper was a chronicle of historical and providential events, not a vehicle for public discussion. By the end of the century, however, journals with at least some independence of the state were beginning to assume an accepted, albeit restricted role in political communication. This new role emerged in two principal forms—one, a national press; the other, transnational.

England's Opening

It was in England that the most significant change in the role of a national press took place during the seventeenth century. After the initial

years beginning in 1632, and in 1637, the Star Chamber introduced a rigorous system of licensing for the press as a whole. But with the coming of the English Revolution, the entire structure of control temporarily collapsed. In 1641, the Star Chamber was abolished, licensing and censorship ceased, the Stationers' monopoly broke down, and the number of printers soared. The ensuing years of armed conflict saw another instance of the antagonistic expansion of the press as both Parliament and the king sponsored competing publications. In the struggle for public opinion, the traditional norms of secrecy that had long governed political communication broke down, and new practices emerged. For example, from the beginning of the Long Parliament in 1641, speeches in the House of Commons found their way into print, and parliamentary leaders began to authorize publication of what had previously been confidential proceedings. Although Parliament passed new legislation to regulate printing in 1643, it failed to reestablish control. In addition to a flood of broadsides, pamphlets, declarations, and petitions, the 1640s saw the appearance of newspapers that unlike the earlier corantos reported domestic political news and sought to sway opinion. Competing newsbooks offered royalist and parliamentary as well as independent versions of battles and other events. This was also the era when censorship began to be attacked in principle, with John Milton's essay *Aeropagitica* (1644) against licensing of the press and the more radical libertarian ideas of the Leveller John Lilburne. But the revolutionary efflorescence of the public sphere was short-lived. In 1649, the Commonwealth reimposed licensing and censorship of print (the Puritan revolutionaries had closed all theaters in 1642), and in the mid-1650s Oliver Cromwell's Protectorate stiffened press controls and closed down public discussion. The revolutionary decades, however, had irreversibly transformed Parliament from a council into a legislature—that is, from a body operating on a confidential and consensual basis, charged with doing the king's business, into a genuine source of authoritative decision-making, powerful in its own right. It would not be long before that power again became the focus of adversarial politics and public debate.³¹

When the Stuarts were restored to the throne in 1660, they brought with them a determination to keep information and political discussion under strict control. Nearly the entire pre-1641 information regime was rebuilt, now, however, through legislation rather than as the sole prerogative of the king. In 1662, Parliament gave authority for licensing publica-

tions to the secretary of state and limited the number of master printers to twenty, nearly all in London. Under this Licensing Act, all copy entered into the Stationers' Register had to be licensed, and all licensed publications had to be entered into the register to prove ownership; the Stationers' copyright system thereby gained the force of law. The Licensing Act also conferred a monopoly of news on the state. Sir Roger L'Estrange, appointed as licenser in 1663, disclosed the regime's attitude toward public discussion when in 1663 he wrote that "a Public Mercury should never have My vote; because I think it makes the Multitude too Familiar with the Actions, and Counsels of their Superiours; too Pragmaticall and Censorious, and gives them, not only an Itch, but a kind of Colourable Right, and License, to be Meddling with the Government."³² This objection, however, apparently did not apply to a tightly controlled court gazette. That year L'Estrange bought the only newsbook to survive the Interregnum, *The Kingdom's Intelligencer*; and in 1665 the government created an official publication along the same model as the *Gazette de France*. For most of the next three decades, the *London Gazette* was England's only newspaper; the words "Printed By Authority" ran under its logo, announcing its special relationship to the state.

The system of licensed printing monopolies, however, was approaching its end. From 1679 to 1682, during a political crisis, the Licensing Act lapsed, unleashing a spate of short-lived metropolitan newspapers. Then, with the overthrow of the Stuarts in the revolution of 1688, the monarchy definitively lost the authority to impose licensing by royal prerogative. For a while, licensing continued under parliamentary authority. But with divisions in Parliament, consensus about what ought to be censored broke down, and a growing body of opinion objected to the Stationers' monopoly on economic grounds and looked to competition as a way of bringing down prices. After licensing lapsed in 1695, it was never renewed, though bills were repeatedly introduced during the next decade to restore the system.

The end of licensing of the press was undoubtedly a landmark in the history of free speech, even though it was not the result of a deliberate, liberally minded decision to end state control of the printed word. The government at first expected to use the law of treason to punish subversive publications, but when Parliament effectively barred that option by making treason convictions more difficult in 1696, the government turned to the law of seditious libel as a functional substitute.³³ The abandonment of

licensing ended requirements for prepublication clearance, but not the risk of being punished for criticism of the government. Eighteenth-century English legal authorities held that liberty of the press meant only freedom from advance censorship, not from penalties applied after publication. Moreover, while the government allowed two theaters to reopen in London during the Restoration, it maintained tight control over what continued to be regarded as an especially dangerous means of expression. And Parliament, the theater of the state, still did not accept public scrutiny of its own deliberations; newspapers remained barred from reporting parliamentary debates until the late 1700s.³⁴

Nonetheless, after 1695 England unquestionably saw an increase in the circulation of political news and the vitality of public discussion in the press. The explanation for this shift lies in complementary structural changes in publishing and politics. The lapse of the Licensing Act precipitated rapid growth in both metropolitan and provincial printing, and as the number of printers increased, so did competition and variety. Pamphlets continued to be the principal vehicles for political writing well into the eighteenth century. But immediately after the end of licensing, London newspapers became more numerous and more frequent: The first triweeklies appeared in 1695, the first daily in 1702, and by 1712 about twenty newspapers were publishing in London every week. The first provincial papers proliferated just after the turn of the century.³⁵ The lapse of licensing also ended the Stationers' monopoly of literary property, setting off a protracted battle that Parliament partially resolved in 1710 when it adopted a copyright act that, for the first time, imposed time limits on literary property.³⁶ An immediate political consequence of the new structure of publishing was that it helped critics of the government gain access to print. The end of monopoly undermined the endogenous control of the industry; the state could no longer count on a corporate body like the Stationers to serve as its agent in censorship.

Changes in the structure of politics created a functional role for an opposition press. The late seventeenth century, even before 1688, saw a shift in the nature of parliamentary selection. In the early 1600s, qualified electors in counties and boroughs had given their assent, usually by acclamation, to men chosen for the House of Commons chiefly on the basis of social precedence, without any public opposition. When contests erupted, they were typically personal and seen as a threat to peace and good order. By 1678, in contrast, electoral contests were common, rivals actively

sought office, and standard rules emerged for polling voters. These were still contests within the social elite, but they were representative of a shift from consensual to adversarial politics that created new occasions for public debate. In 1694, at nearly the same time that it failed to renew the licensing system, Parliament adopted a bill requiring elections every three years; during the next two decades, there were ten general elections, and for the first time, intense electoral competition between two parties, Whigs and Tories, which alternated in power. Political competition helped to generate interest in political news and argument, but perhaps even more important was the effect of the parties on each other, as antagonism once again contributed to the growth of the press. At first only the party out of power sought to mobilize public opinion through the press, but under Robert Harley (earl of Oxford), Tory governments in the early 1700s began to operate a concerted propaganda effort both in power and out. As of 1702, there was only one government newspaper, the *London Gazette*; by 1713, when Harley's machine was at its peak, the ministry was supporting five London newspapers, each serving a somewhat different audience. In addition, it underwrote a considerable volume of pamphlets. Modern politicians can only be envious of the talent Harley recruited: His two leading writers were Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift, and it was Swift who served as chief of propaganda, supervising the party hacks and printers. Repeatedly rejecting calls for the restoration of licensing and censorship, Harley opted instead for a strategy of permanent propaganda and selective prosecution of the government's opponents in the press.³⁷

To control criticism, the English government after 1700 turned to a basis of criminal prosecution rarely used while licensing had been in effect. Benefiting from a change in judicial interpretation, the government began to frame its charges against dissenters as violations of the common law of seditious libel. A century earlier, judges had conceived of seditious libel as defamation of individual magistrates, but the term had gradually taken on an extended meaning that included libel of the state, and in a case in 1704 Chief Justice John Holt stripped seditious libel entirely of its older sense of individual defamation and ruled that words bringing the government into disrepute were criminal: "If men should not be called to account for possessing the people with an ill opinion of the Government," the chief justice declared, "no Government can subsist; for it is very necessary for every Government, that the people should have a good opinion of it." In pursuing such cases, the state could secure general warrants for

searches of homes and offices (that is, without specifying the object of a search), and it could bring charges without an indictment by grand jury. Not even proof of a statement's truth could be offered in defense; under a Star Chamber precedent from 1606, the truth of a libel aggravated the crime. Although defendants were entitled to jury trials, juries were permitted to rule only on whether the accused had made the statement; judges decided whether it was libelous. Thus, after the end of prepublication censorship, the state had not only legal authority, but also expedient legal principles, to silence critics.³⁸

During the eighteenth century, the volume of prosecutions for seditious libel varied depending on political circumstances; the government was sometimes unable to get convictions but nonetheless brought charges to intimidate authors and printers into silence or flight abroad, to jail low-ranking employees of newspapers, and to impose higher costs on newspaper owners. The government targeted not only genuine radicals outside the two dominant parties but also journalists associated with the parliamentary opposition. Under the Tories, for example, the Whig editor of the *Flying Post* took flight himself and went into exile after being convicted of seditious libel in 1713.³⁹

Besides relying on propaganda and prosecutions, Harley's government in 1712 also introduced a third policy that was destined to evolve into a primary method of controlling the press. This was the stamp tax. The occasion was yet another effort to restore licensing, in this instance a proposed bill that would have required printers to register every press with the government and to list on every publication the names and addresses of the author, printer, and publisher. Instead of this measure, however, the government decided to extend a tax that had been imposed the previous year on calendars and almanacs. Known as a stamp tax because stamps were required on printed items to show the tax had been paid, the duty amounted to a halfpenny per half sheet (one penny per full sheet) for every copy, plus one shilling per advertisement. Since the typical paper at the time was printed on a half sheet and sold for a penny, the burden on most newspapers (not counting the duty on advertisements) was equivalent to a 50 percent sales tax. While the prospective revenue was part of the motivation, at least some members of the government anticipated that the tax would stifle opposition newspapers.⁴⁰ Yet, in this initial form, it failed to do so. Although four newspapers immediately ceased publication, the press was able to recover, in part because the Whigs stepped up subsidies to

their publications. Printers, moreover, soon found a loophole in the law that allowed them to pay only two shillings for an entire edition run off on one and a half sheets (six pages). In 1725, however, Parliament tightened both the law and its enforcement, and in 1757, 1776, 1789, and 1797, it continued to push up rates until the retail price of a single copy of a newspaper hit 6d, nearly a day's pay for a typical wage-earner. Political motives were clearly at work. During the Parliamentary debate on a stamp tax increase in 1776, Lord North said the demand for newspapers arose from a foolish curiosity and that newspapers, therefore, were a luxury that could stand higher taxation.⁴¹ The government did not suppress newspapers outright, but higher prices kept in check their numbers and circulation, which otherwise would have risen more substantially. The stamp tax made it impossible to operate a popular press that was at once cheap and legal. The printers and hawkers of cheap papers that tried to escape unstamped in the search for a more popular audience suffered the legal consequences, including periodic arrest. Like the earlier licensing laws, the stamp tax shaped the structure of the industry so as to minimize the chances of a popular opposition press emerging that could threaten the government. It also had a more subtle effect in shaping the conception of the public as consisting only of the upper strata of society.

While the stamp tax provided an indirect means of influencing the press, the British government also continued the more direct, old-fashioned method of simply paying writers and owners of newspapers for their support. This kind of intervention reached a peak under Harley's Whig successor, Robert Walpole, who maintained an elaborate network of informants in the press while using bribery and prosecutions to limit the strength of opposition publications. In 1722, troubled by the *London Journal*, the government simply bought it. The English press in the eighteenth century did include oppositional elements, but they were severely constrained and manipulated.⁴² After a brief period during the 1730s when control of the theaters broke down, Walpole obtained legislation for a full-scale licensing system for theatrical performances.⁴³

The development of postal communication from the Restoration through the eighteenth century reflected the same shift in England's information regime: The means of public communication were expanded, but society was kept in check. In the mid-1600s, regular horse posts were established on the six major roads that radiated out of London into the provinces. Under the Turnpike Act of 1660, the roads themselves began

to be improved, and postal service was then extended beyond the Six Roads across England. A wave of turnpike construction a century later upgraded the routes from the major centers in the provinces to London and to each other, and by 1760 the Post Office offered regular service among the provincial centers as well as to and from London. Private competition was not welcome; in 1680, a London merchant named William Dockwra started a penny post in London only to have it taken over by the Post Office two years later. The Treasury had the dominant hand in postal policy. In 1711—and again in 1765, 1784, and several more times at the turn of the century—postal rates were raised to levels that, like the stamp taxes, reduced the volume of popular communication.

Our image of the post office as a routine bureaucracy does not capture its importance in the era before telegraphy. By the eighteenth century, writes Kenneth Ellis, the British Post Office was “the centre of imperial communications, controlling a large fleet of packets; a propaganda and intelligence organ, serving as the government’s mouthpiece, eyes, and ears; and an important source of patronage, employing hundreds of officials, postmasters, and sailors.”⁴⁴ Officials, peers, and members of Parliament enjoyed the privilege of franking mail, which they used in enormous volumes for their private benefit. Several officials used their privilege to operate a profitable newspaper distribution business. The government franked its own publications as well as pamphlets and newspapers that supported its policies. By the 1760s, the volume of metropolitan newspapers being sent for free by the government to the provinces equaled the total circulation of the provincial press.⁴⁵ In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Post Office also began to carry the opposition press, including papers franked by opposition members of Parliament, but postal clerks scrutinized publications to weed out those that exceeded the limits of allowable dissent.

The same concern for keeping society in check also constrained the development of education and literacy. In the seventeenth century, England experienced an “educational revolution” as schools became more widely available through efforts largely independent of the state. But the spread of schooling fell far short of becoming universal; the adult male literacy rate in England, measured by signatures, stalled at around 60 per cent through the eighteenth century. Nor was there any felt urgency to reduce illiteracy; much of the English elite believed that educating the great mass of the population would only unfit them for the drudgery they

needed to perform, misled them about their expectations in life, and thereby increase discontent.⁴⁶

Partly as a result of the limits of literacy, the "public" of this period still comprised only a small minority of the population. Estimates of newspaper readership for the eighteenth century are highly speculative. Although there are some figures for circulation, more than one person typically read a copy, but no one knows whether the average ratio of readers to copies was three, five, ten, twenty, or more. For estimates of the *total* weekly newspaper audience, however, the correct multiplier is likely to be at the lower rather than at the upper end of that range, because many of the same people who read one paper read others. (In other words, total newspaper circulations cannot be added up and multiplied by ten or twenty because of overlap among their readers.) In 1704, according to an internal Treasury report, there were nine newspapers, all in London, with a total weekly circulation of 43,800 copies—about one copy for every 133 people in England and Wales. By 1750, when dailies were more common and provincial weeklies had spread, the total number of newspaper stamps issued indicates one copy per week for every 45 people.⁴⁷ These numbers suggest a sharply restricted readership. In the 1790s, Edmund Burke estimated the political reading public at 400,000, about 5 percent of the population.⁴⁸

Many people no doubt listened as newspapers were read aloud in taverns and other public places or heard about the news secondhand. But the limits of newspaper sales prevented those who ran the papers from acquiring the power and autonomy that their successors would be able to achieve on the basis of larger circulations and greater revenue from both readers and advertisers. A larger market would later permit newspapers to employ more substantial staffs, to gather information directly instead of relying on authorities, and to exert a stronger influence of their own. They were not yet in that position in the eighteenth century.

France and the Transnational Public

The appearance of a semiautonomous national press in England after 1695 stands in some contrast to the development of the press in France. Down to the revolution, the French state continued to exercise direct supervision over the realm of print through prepublication censorship and

an extensive system of book police. Approval for publication could come in the form of a *privilege*, which conferred an exclusive right to publish, or a tacit permission, which the regime granted to works that it was willing to allow without formal approval. Censorship wasn't completely effective, but that doesn't mean it was inconsequential. The state committed substantial resources to enforcement. By 1750, there were 130 censors; over the entire period from 1659 to 1789, 17 percent of the prisoners in the Bastille were sent there for offenses related to the book trade.⁴⁹

Royal privileges structured the entire domain of print, reserving various areas of publishing to specific printers; there was no legal way to start a new periodical without obtaining a privilege. According to a comparative study, French periodicals were not only less numerous than those in Britain and North America but also less varied. By 1750, there were fewer than 50 French-language periodicals, but nearly a hundred in Britain and North America. Literacy was lower in France, standing at about 40 percent among adult men. But the French population in 1750 was so much greater—about 21 million, compared to about 8 million in Britain and the American colonies—that the literate public was probably about two-thirds larger in France. The explanation for the more limited number of French publications may lie, therefore, not in the number of readers but in the effect of the two regimes on the market. English publishers had more freedom to create new publications and sought wider markets by making the content of periodicals more varied and practical. French periodical publishers, in contrast, sought monopoly privileges and cultivated a more limited, aristocratic readership.⁵⁰

It is easy, however, to overstate the differences between Britain and France. Not only did the British government check any threat from public communication through the use of prosecutions, taxes, and favors. Britain also retained many of the characteristics of an old-regime society: The monarchy and the church remained dominant institutions, and differential relations to superiors permeated social life.⁵¹ In France by mid-century, and increasingly after 1750, the influence of the Enlightenment was widely felt among the elite. Censorship was no longer as strict as it had been, and publishers found it easier to contrive a rationale for new publications.⁵² The divisions within the French state itself, particularly between royal authorities and the *parlements*, created space for public discussion. What the French read, moreover, did not correspond exactly to what was printed in France.

As a result of the regulation of domestic publishing, extraterritorial printers had come to assume a major role in the French public sphere. Many of the great works of eighteenth-century French literature were published not in France, but in the Netherlands or Switzerland, and circulated through semiclandestine networks. The underground traffic, as Robert Darnton has described it, mixed Voltaire and Rousseau with pornography in a class of forbidden books all promiscuously labeled "philosophical."⁵³ Extraterritorial newspapers faced more constraints, however, because they depended upon the postal system to reach French readers from their publishing base in the semi-independent principalities and neighboring countries around the periphery of France. In addition, their correspondents inside France could obtain information and send reports to their editors only if they had the forbearance and cooperation of the state. But rather than try to bar these newspapers entirely—which would likely have failed—French officials developed a *modus vivendi* with them. Ministers used the extraterritorial press to plant stories that would have greater credibility precisely because they did not come from censored domestic publications. Paradoxically, the officials had to accept the extraterritorial newspapers' uncensored reports (including criticism of the state by the parlements) in order for the papers to have credibility as a channel for ministerial leaks. In return for their ability to circulate in France, the newspapers did not explicitly attack French authority.⁵⁴

But the French-language extraterritorial press had a larger importance. Although there were several hundred newspapers in Europe by the mid-1700s, most of them were censored, official gazettes. Many elite readers across the continent subscribed to a French-language extraterritorial newspaper to obtain news not only about other countries but also about their own. The most important center for such publications was the Dutch Republic, which had long been a leader in producing books for export. The Dutch did not protect freedom of the press as a matter of principle; in fact, the number of books banned in the United Provinces increased during the eighteenth century.⁵⁵ But the Netherlands lacked a strong central government capable of enforcing any control; power resided in the cities, and thus printers could move from one location to another to evade censorship. The authorities were also much less concerned about publications exported abroad than about those read at home. As a result, an independent press was able to develop that reported news of diplomacy, wars, and other major political events to an elite readership across Europe.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the foremost of these newspapers was the *Gazette de Leyde*, which had appeared continuously since 1677. According to Jeremy Popkin, the Leiden paper presented a picture of the world that differed from the one in the court gazettes: The central actors in its pages were ministers rather than monarchs, and the news included the domestic political conflicts that the court gazettes were unable to report. Written in sober language, and unwilling to publish contributions by interested parties, the paper relied on its own network of paid, albeit mostly part-time, newswriters in perhaps eight to ten cities, including Paris, London, Hamburg, Vienna, and St. Petersburg. The Leiden gazette's circulation provided the revenue to support this network. A profitable enterprise, it apparently refused any payments by governments or other groups, and it carried relatively little advertising. While generally sympathetic to constitutional government and civic republicanism, the paper sought to give an impartial chronicle of events; it was, Popkin says, the "newspaper of record" of its time, as well known to its elite public as the *New York Times* is today.⁵⁶

Histories of the press and the public sphere that have concentrated on publications within the major European states have neglected the significance of this phenomenon. But as the Leiden paper and its competitors show, a transnational market for news had already emerged by the eighteenth century, and on the basis of that market, editors and entrepreneurs were able to create a commercially sustainable, transnational journalism. By exporting papers to many countries (and often selling virtually none at home), the transnational papers gained a degree of autonomy from state control that newspapers produced and sold within a single country could not readily achieve. The European state system, Popkin suggests, was too fragmented to permit joint action to suppress the news, and states instead began to use the transnational press to publicize their views of events. "By at least the mid-seventeenth century," he writes, "the European state system had come to accommodate publications that served no other purpose than to collect the news and arguments put forward by the major powers so that those interested could weigh all sides to a dispute."⁵⁷ The public that could participate in this sphere of discussion was limited; it cost far more to subscribe to an extraterritorial newspaper such as the *Gazette de Leyde* than to a domestic paper, although both were available in select coffeehouses and reading rooms. The transnational press, however, anticipated the critical public role that high-level,

independent, commercial journalism could play as a mediator and shaper of elite opinion.

The De Facto Public Sphere

These developments, both national and transnational, created a different model of political communication from the one that had traditionally dominated political thought. Internal political divisions and conflicts among states broke down the normative obstacles to open discussion, allowing new practices to take shape. Although states still sought to control public information and debate in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, a public sphere began to emerge *de facto*. The new possibilities of public communication were already on view during the English Revolution and in the Netherlands before John Locke and others formulated the theory of representative government in the late seventeenth century.⁵⁸ The Dutch Republic was a model for the English; England, for the French. *De facto* freedoms created a basis in experience for theoretical reflection and revolutionary legal principles that would in time give affirmative protection to popular communication.

The *de facto* emergence of a public sphere ran counter to the trend toward more centralized state power. With the development of central bureaucracies, professional armies, and new systems of finance in the early modern period, Europe saw the rise of the most powerful states in the world, capable of extracting and mobilizing far more resources than ever before from their own and other peoples. Improved informational capacities were part of that transformation. States had obvious interests in transportation and communication networks and the development of scientific and technical knowledge. As James Scott has shown, states sought not only to gather more intelligence, but also to change society in a variety of ways to make it more "legible." For example, they required people to adopt surnames so as to be more easily identified for purposes of taxation and conscription, and they demanded that linguistic minorities adopt the national language.⁵⁹ State-building interests, however, cannot explain the decline in the norms of political secrecy. Rulers did not simply acquire new means of monitoring society; the public also began to acquire new means of monitoring their rulers. Society did not just become more legible to the state; the state became more legible to the public.⁶⁰ The

public sphere benefited in some ways from state-building, but it did not derive solely from it.⁶¹

Both in Britain and on the continent, the beginnings of independent journalism depended on complementary changes in politics and markets. Starting in the 1690s, divisions between Whigs and Tories in England had opened up the space for a more competitive press that included opposition newspapers. So, too, the fragmentation of power in both the Netherlands and the European state system as a whole opened up the space for a competitive, semiautonomous transnational press. In both cases, a market for news emerged that provided an alternative to the state as a basis of financial support, but the market was limited primarily to an elite public. British policy helped to ensure that result through the stamp tax; France did the same by preventing an independent press from developing inside its borders. The public sphere did not develop entirely from the top down; there were episodes of popular political contention, such as the English Revolution, when new forms of communication developed outside the ruling elite. But, given hostile state policy, independent popular media were not yet sustainable.

The public sphere of early modern Europe should not be mistaken for a democratic ideal, as if reason reached its highest and most cultivated form amid the heady aromas of eighteenth-century London coffeehouses and the perfumes of Paris salons, only to slide down a path to degradation in later centuries. While the early modern public sphere represented a shift away from political secrecy, it was still socially exclusive, subject to the mundane influences of money and status, and routinely manipulated by those in power. Public opinion may have emerged as a new force in politics, but the public sphere that European states allowed to develop in the early modern period sharply limited the opinion that could be heard. Except in some highly restricted ways, the public sphere did not yet provide society with a means of self-government.