

PREPUBLICATION VERSION

'I saw the Man, that saw the Man, that said he saw this wondrous Sight': mediating the spectacle of George III's coronation in the newspapers

As I have seen it, I declare I would not have missed the Sight upon any Consideration. The Friendship of Mr. Rolles, who procured me a Pass-Ticket, as they call it, enabled me to be present both in the Hall and the Abbey; and as to the Procession out of Doors, I had a fine View of it [...] I wish you had been with me: But as you have been deprived of a Sight, which probably very few that were present will ever see again, I will endeavor to describe it to you as minutely as I can, while the Circumstances are fresh in my Memory; though my Description must fall very short of the Reality.

(Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in the Country, containing a circumstantial Detail of every Particular that passed at the Coronation, St. James's Chronicle, 24-26 September 1761)

The history of the newspaper is, in part, a history of vicarious visual observation – a history of a complex information network feeding readers' appetites for mediated experiences of multiple things which could not possibly be seen firsthand by any single individual. Journalism does much more than report the visual, of course. Indeed, early newspapers from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries may seem to be connected more closely to the ear than to the eye since so many of their nuggets of news are framed by such expressions as 'we hear that...' and 'it is said that...'.¹ But still the idea of the newspaper as a substitute eye – or network of eyes – working in the service of the reader has long been fundamental to conceptions of the medium. That idea is reflected in such titles as *The Observer*, a late seventeenth-century paper, as well as in an array of later *Spectators*, *Observers*, *Spys* and *Monitors*. Glasgow has had a *Sentinel*, Connaught a *Watchman*, and Cheltenham a *Looker-On*. Numerous readers have accessed their news through an *Argus* – an invocation of the many-eyed creature of myth which underscores the multiple acts of observation that a collaborative news organization can achieve.

¹ On the sense of the aural in early newspapers, see Ann Dean, 'Court Culture and Political News in London's Eighteenth-Century Newspapers', *English Literary History*, September 2006 73(3), 631-649.

Newspapers, these titles suggest, observe, look, and watch, and those who produce newspapers have exploited the most up-to-date technologies to transmit to their consumers that which has been seen. For around two centuries of the printed newspaper's history, the conveyance of what had entered the eye rested upon the power of the printed word. Then, with new technologies, alternative ways of rendering the visual – with a movement from word to image – were eagerly exploited by the merchants of news. The nineteenth century, when the steam press largely replaced the hand press, saw the mass printing of illustrated papers, such as the *Illustrated London News*, launched in 1842, with many of the illustrations engraved from photographs. By the 1880s photojournalism itself was coming into being with the introduction of the first photographs into news publications. There was clearly a huge public appetite for news with rich pictorial content: when the *Daily Mirror* was relaunched in 1904 as the first illustrated daily paper, it soon garnered an unprecedented readership, and the century that followed saw the use of photography become a norm of the newspapers and one to which an increasing volume of page space was devoted.² With the more recent movement to online papers (or 'papers'), images – including moving images – have become even more dominant in the conveyance of news.

Given the obvious and inescapable visuality of the later news media, the fact that the earlier word-based forms of news reporting could in any way be 'visual' can be easily overlooked. For example, a work such as *The Making of Visual News: A History of Photography in the Press* brings with it a suggestion that there basically was no visual news before photography.³ This essay aims to provide a reminder of the visual aspirations that are sometimes apparent in the work of earlier news writers by considering the newspaper reporting of one historical event: the coronation of George III. This event, which took place on 22 September 1761, was 'spectacular' by design – a visually lavish public occasion that formed a part of the 'spectacular politics' of the era.⁴ Yet, whilst it was witnessed in person

² See Kevin Williams, *Read All About It! A history of the British newspaper* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 133.

³ Thierry Gervais and Gaëlle Morel, *The Making of Visual News: A History of Photography in the Press* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

⁴ I take the phrase from Paula Backscheider's *Spectacular Politics: Theatrical Power and Mass Culture in Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), but it should be noted that Backscheider herself uses it in an account of the political negotiations at work in popular culture – notably the theatre – rather than in royal pageantry.

by many, it was experienced by most people at the time in a mediated form – largely through newspaper reporting. There is a fulsomeness in much of that reporting and it will be suggested here that the coronation had a significance within news history for its exertion of a pressure upon the newspapers which produced a surge in the attention given to elaborate description, and particularly visual description. The press response to the spectacle – to both the preparations and the event itself – constituted an attempt to create a spectacle in words, with reports which, in terms of volume and style, outstripped the terse, fact-focused reporting that is often seen as characteristic of early newspaper journalism. In *The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know About Itself*, Andrew Pettegree suggests that early newspapers were, in fact, unappealing for many readers because of their ‘dressed sequence of bare, undecorated facts’ – engaging prose was simply not the point of the reporting in the early printed newspaper.⁵ But in the reports of the coronation, there are signs of a different type of writing, one in which vivid description is a clear aspiration. The coronation furthermore had an effect at a meta-level by crystalizing discussion surrounding the value of actually witnessing a spectacle and of the power of the press to represent a visual event. Had the transmission of news in Britain arrived at a point in 1761 where one could ‘see’ an event better by staying at home and opening the paper than by going out and witnessing it in person?

Some exceptionality in the form of reporting the coronation was, of course, more or less inevitable, given the uniqueness of the event and the fact that coverage by the newspapers was fully expected and could be carefully planned. The death of a monarch may come as a surprise, with journalists unready with their pencils, but the ceremony that follows the death and formalizes a new monarch’s succession is a scheduled event, giving news workers ample opportunities to plan their reporting strategies and to be present in person as witnesses. The coronation was also a rare event in the political life of the country: when George III donned his robes for his investiture in Westminster Abbey, it was over thirty years since the last such ceremony and it would be half a century until the next. And it was an event which, as a public rite of power, was intended to be seen by many – the gathering of a large body of observers is one of the main points of going through with the ceremony. In

⁵ Andrew Pettegree, *The Invention of News* (8)

theory, coronations may be carried out in private by the core participants, but, in practice, they are almost always performed with multiple viewers, and the presence of the viewers plays a key part in the wider effects of the ceremony. This very point was made explicitly in the run-up to George III's investiture by an anonymous pamphleteer in *Thoughts on the Coronation*:

All Pomp is instituted for the sake of the Public. A Shew without Spectators can no longer be a Shew. [...] As the Wisdom of our Ancestors has appointed a very splendid and ceremonious Inauguration of our Kings, their Intention was that they should receive their Crown with such awful Rites, as might for ever impress upon them a due Sense of the Duties which they were to take [...]; and that the People, as many as can possibly be Witnesses to any single Act, should openly acknowledge their Sovereign by universal Homage.⁶

The new monarch, in other words, is psychologically inducted into the position through the intense awareness of being looked at, whilst the mass viewing impresses upon the public a sense of the rightness of the social hierarchy. It is a theatricalised event, which stimulates awe in order to maintain a power structure.

The theatricality of the occasion certainly shines through in the newspaper accounts surrounding George III's coronation. Examining the newspapers from the summer and autumn of 1761, it is clear that the preparations and the event itself produced a significant 'media event', with literally hundreds of reports appearing in the London papers, as well as in the provincial, Scottish and Irish presses. Prior to the coronation, the papers were filled with reports of the preparations. The heart of Westminster was being transformed for the event, and there were accounts of the building of scaffolding along the route of the procession, and of an open 'Coronation theatre' near Westminster Abbey. There were advertisements for tickets for places on the scaffolding and in houses along the route, as well as for wigs, jewellery and clothes to wear on the occasion. Rulings concerning safety were spread via the newspapers – reminders that fires were not to be lit near the

⁶ *Thoughts on the Coronation* (London: 1761), 3. (The ESTC states that this work was 'revised' by Samuel Johnson).

temporary woodworks, for example – and there were reports of several accidents: carpenters and upholsterers falling off the scaffolding. There were accounts of foreign royals and dignitaries arriving in London for the occasion, of lavish fireworks being prepared, of Handel’s coronation anthem, and of the procession: who would take part, in what order, and with what regalia. There was discussion of the high prices of seats, alongside advertisements for pamphlets on earlier coronations and for collections of verse penned for the approaching event. There were predictions regarding the weather and reports of a huge awning being prepared for the route should it rain. There was news of what the King and Queen would be wearing, and so on.

The idea of the coronation as spectacle dominates this news. Extrapolating the general from the particular, the prime issues being written about are: positions from which the procession will be visible, what the procession will look like, and how the spectators may themselves be a part of the spectacle, with regard to attire. And interwoven in this attention to the spectacle was a concern that not enough people were going to be able to witness the event in order for it to be effective. The route of the procession was relatively short: from Westminster Hall to Westminster Abbey and back. It was this issue, in fact, which motivated the author of *Thoughts on the Coronation*: the pamphlet offers a critique of ‘the narrowness and shortness of the Way’, it argues for ‘a wider and longer Course, which may be again enlarged and varied by going one Way, and returning another’, and it proposes a series of alternative routes which would afford room to many more spectators.⁷

The route was, in fact, extended slightly – ‘by going part of Parliament Street through Bridge Street into King’s Street’⁸ – but it was still not long, so places were restricted. This explains the high price of tickets – a simple supply and demand issue. Many attendees were paying 5 guineas for a place, but there were reports of huge sums changing hands. The *Dublin Courier*, for example, reported

As an instance of the great eagerness to view the grand shew of the Coronation, we are informed, that a gentleman has been prevailed on to take a room for his lady at

⁷ *Thoughts on the Coronation*, pp. 3 + 4

⁸ *Sussex Advertiser*, 21 Sept. 1761

the rate of 140 guineas; but the appointment of the solemnity of the Coronation falling unhappily about the time when the lady expects to be delivered, she has farther prevailed on her husband, to let a skillful man-midwife, nurse, &c. attend her, and to hire an additional withdrawing room; least the great hurry of the day should bring on her labour.⁹

There was, in short, a frenzied fascination with *seeing* the event; this was both reported in the newspapers and fuelled by the newspapers as they fostered a sense of expectation through their accounts of the preparations. At the heart of what the papers were mediating was a mass desire for something unmediated: for traditional spectatorship and participation.

But in the papers of the time, we also find critique of traditional spectatorship – a critique which was intimately tied to the power of newspapers. In the *St. James's Chronicle* of 29 August to 1 September, for example, there is a long unsigned letter to the printer, Henry Baldwin, complaining about the coronation fever. It is mere fashion, the author argues, which is motivating people to pay exorbitant sums for a ticket, and those attending, he suggests, will at best catch only a momentary glimpse of the new king in the procession: they will, in fact, barely be spectators to the event. The writer does not oppose the coronation, but he denounces the passion surrounding it, and he concludes his letter by stating how he will experience the event:

As for my own Part, I intend to see the Coronation the Day after it is over, and that for so small a Price as Two-Pence Halfpenny: And I will answer for it, I shall be able to give a better Account of it, than any that will be present the Day before; for I will read it in your Chronicle, Mr. Baldwin, and without those who really see it on the 22d, see it over again with me on the 23d in your Paper, when they and I give our Accounts of it twenty Years hence, they will not persuade their Hearers that they saw it at all, while I shall have the Credit of having had a compleat View of the whole. On this Account, I shall keep my five Guineas in my Pocket on the 22d, and content

⁹ *Dublin Courier*, 24 July 1761

myself with saying, when asked if I saw the Coronation, that I saw the Man, that saw the Man, that said he saw this wondrous Sight.¹⁰

We might easily dismiss this letter as a witty and entertaining piece of puffery for the newspaper in which it is printed (it could have been authored by one of the proprietors – there were twelve of them – or someone connected to the group).¹¹ But perhaps we might take it a little more seriously than that, and treat the letter as a sincere expression of faith in the power of the modern newspaper – as a claim that the news system has reached a point at which its reports can genuinely compete with actual witnessing. The author sees the media system around him as the Virtual Reality of his day, and against the conservative author of *Thoughts on the Coronation*, whose wish is that more eyes should see the new king, his letter stands as a vision of modernity in which the need for human presence is being eroded by the sophistication of media representation.

We should note that the *St. James's Chronicle* was a new paper – founded just six months before the coronation – and it was organised along decidedly modern lines, in terms of business (it was a joint-stock company) as well as production, under the editorship of Nathaniel Thomas, who is not a well-known figure, but by all accounts was a progressive and distinguished manager of the paper.¹² It employed the services of a team of news gatherers – something the author of the letter clearly knew as he urged Baldwin to ensure good coverage of the coronation:

Before I conclude, I must desire, Mr. Baldwin, that you will let your Devils loose on that Occasion, to join the mob-led Multitude, that they may say they saw the Sight as well as the rest of the World; for if my Prayers shall be heard, there is no Man now alive that will see another Coronation.'

¹⁰ *St. James Chronicle*, 29 August – 1 September 1761

¹¹ Regarding the proprietors, see Richard P. Bond and Marjorie N. Bond, 'The Minute Books of the *St. James's Chronicle*', *Studies in Bibliography*, 28 (1975), 17-40 (p. 18).

¹² See Bond and Bond, p. 19.

With the plural 'Devils', the author points to the several sets of eyes which Baldwin has at his disposal. With a team at work, the newspaper has panoptic potential; like Argus, it can harness multiple perspectives on an event and thus 'see' in ways unavailable to a single spectator.

In the reports of the coronation itself, we find the newspapers taking their role of vicarious observer extremely seriously, and here it is worth remembering that, however long the route of the procession, only a fraction of the population would be present. It was estimated that around 50,000 people would be able to see the procession; the population of London at the time was around three quarters of a million; the population of Britain around nine million. The newspapers provided the lens through which most Britons would 'witness' the coronation, and in terms of the volume of text devoted to the event and the style of description there is a sense of the press rising to the occasion.

It is difficult to demonstrate concisely the prolix nature of the reporting, but it can be said that no topic was more fully written about in the wake of the event, and that innumerable columns were devoted to the topic. The *St. James's Chronicle* must have pleased its correspondent, for it offered very extensive coverage including, for example, a vast '*Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend in the Country, containing a circumstantial Detail of every Particular that passed at the Coronation*' (quoted earlier as an epigraph). The gentleman's attempt to describe the 'Sight [...] as minutely as I can' filled more than a quarter of the issue.¹³ Most of the other London papers were similarly generous in their coverage.

The papers beyond London reprinted lengthy accounts of the coronation itself, whilst also reporting the various events which were held outside of the capital to honour the new king. The *Ipswich Journal*, for example, included a long report of local festivities and reported

We have received Accounts to the same Purpose from Norwich, Yarmouth, Colchester, Bury, and almost every Place of note in this and the neighbouring Counties; but we have not Room to enlarge upon the Joy and Loyalty that the

¹³ 24-26 September 1761.

Magistrates and Inhabitants of each Town testified on that Occasion. We are obliged to omit several Advertisements, which shall be inserted in our next.¹⁴

This paper, then, was prepared to sacrifice advertising revenue in order to expand upon the coronation, and still there was not room for all that it wanted to report. But it is not just a matter of column inches. There is something almost novelistic in some of the description found in the coronation reports. Here, for example, is a description of the Princess Dowager in the procession, which appeared in both London and provincial papers (the *Derby Mercury* is quoted here):

She was conducted by the Hand by his Royal Highness Prince William-Henry, dressed in White and Silver. Her Train, which was of Silk, was but short, and therefore not borne by any Person; and her Hair flowed down her Shoulders in hanging Curls. She had no Cap, but only a Circlet of Diamonds.

The rest of the Princes and Princesses, her Highness's Children, followed as under; His Royal Highness Prince Henry-Frederick, also in White and Silver, handing his Sister the Princess Louisa Ana, who was dress'd in a Slip, with hanging Sleeves. His Royal Highness Prince Frederick-William, in White and Silver, handing his youngest Sister, the Princess Caroline Matilda, dressed also in a Slip with hanging Sleeves.

Both the young Princesses had their Hair combed upwards, which was contrived to lie flat at the Back of their Heads in a very pretty Manner.¹⁵

Such reporting goes several steps beyond the matter of essential information. The prose is not comprised, in Pettegree's phrase, of 'bare, undecorated facts' but is rather enriched with details and clearly aspires to be pictorial whilst also offering opinions on what has been seen. The paper aims to serve as the reader's substitute eye whilst also guiding judgment of what has been seen.

¹⁴ 26 September 1761.

¹⁵ *Derby Mercury*, 25 September 1761

The newspapers included accounts of the king which similarly highlight the spectacular qualities of the coronation and ‘predigest’ the material so as to urge readers to adopt responses akin to those of actual approving spectators. An encounter between the royals and the crowd was described at some length in the *London Evening Post*:

When their Majesties and the Procession on Tuesday last, had advanced to that Part of Parliament-Street, which fronts to Westminster, Bridge, the whole Cavalcade stopped for some Time, in order to view the Populace, who from the Center Arch downwards, with loud Acclamations of Joy, Hats waving in the Air, &c. perhaps exhibited as fine an Appearance as ever was seen in England. When their Majesties turned the Corner of King-street, they seemed struck with Surprize at the splendid Appearance which the Ladies and Gentleman made in the large Scaffold in St. Margaret’s Church Yard, and turning themselves towards them in the most amiable Manner imaginable, were answered by such a universal overflowing of Joy and Dutiful Respect, as neither Tongue can utter, or Pen describe.¹⁶

It is a depiction of the rite of power working like clockwork: the crowd views the monarch, the monarch views the crowd, both parties are moved by the vision, mutual respect is fostered. The newspaper serves as a spectator of a spectatorial act; it offers readers a flavour of what occurred (whilst demurely stating that such a scene is indescribable), but significantly it also invites them to share the sentiments of the crowd. A pro-monarch account such as this works as a form of interpellation. It does not just report the spectacle but applauds it and hails readers as fellow admirers; it thus mediates not only the event of the rite of power but also its intended function.

Around the coronation of George III, then, we see the news press doing something commonly observed by print-focused historians such as Elizabeth Eisenstein and Benedict Andersen: in response to a state event, the newspapers can be seen at work in the ongoing building of an ‘imagined community’. This is not something which was new in 1761. In fact, we should be cautious about suggesting that anything we see in the coronation coverage

¹⁶ *London Evening Post*, 22-24 September 1761

was radically new. However, in the story of the news in the long eighteenth century – a narrative of incremental developments – we might note some points of significance from 1761 which suggest that the coronation crystallized certain developing elements within the business of reporting the news. One is the dedication with which news writers attended to the verbal rendering of spectacle; the accession of George III was widely welcomed at the time, and the spectacle of his spectacular coronation produced a notable swelling of evocative prose in the papers. Equally noteworthy is the confidence in the capability of the news press, which has been illustrated here with the unsigned letter to the new and clearly thriving *St. James's Chronicle*. The letter is an extreme expression of faith in mediated experience. It was written with the prospect of an exceptional conglomeration of bodies in the capital. 'There never was at one time,' it was reported, 'for a Century last past, so many People in London as there was on the Coronation Day.'¹⁷ Eschewing the crowd, the letter sees in the modern newspaper a new – and better – form of public participation. We might see this as one of history's misguided visions of the future: no medium has ever replaced the sensation of attending a live event. But the letter's conviction says much about the contemporary status of newspapers and of their representational power.

¹⁷ *Derby Mercury*, 25 September 1761