

# Who Contributed to Late-Eighteenth-Century English Newspapers? Authorship, Accessibility and Public Debate (1790–92)

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**Abstract:** A dominant narrative shaping how we view the eighteenth-century English press is that newspapers were important forums for debate and opinion, and that they contributed significantly to the gradual broadening of political participation and inclusion. Yet we still know rather little about the contributors to newspapers in this period, and thus about the social accessibility of this public forum. Based on a systematic reading of six daily newspapers from the politically turbulent years 1790–92, this article explores the following questions: Who contributed to late eighteenth-century English newspapers in this important period? How open was the English press to writers from different social backgrounds?

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## Introduction

Authorship has long been a neglected area of eighteenth-century newspaper studies. In an attempt to settle the vexed question of newspaper accessibility for different social groups, scholars of the late eighteenth-century English newspaper have typically focussed their attention on establishing the identity of newspaper readers. It is, however, equally interesting to ask who the *authors* of newspaper texts were. According to Hannah Barker and Simon Burrows, political commentary in England was open to ‘ordinary citizens’ who, supposing they could read and write, could reach those in power through letters to newspaper editors (2002, 15). This was certainly a familiar trope in the period, as demonstrated by the rhetoric of newspaper letter writers, but was it actually possible? How ‘ordinary’ were these authors in reality?

Questions relating to newspaper authorship and attribution are difficult to answer, because most eighteenth-century contributions were either unsigned or published under a pseudonym. Circumstantial evidence about the identities of specific contributors is scarce and often only available through scattered references in published memoirs or private diaries. This lack of external evidence has forced newspaper historians to rely heavily on information to be gleaned from the newspapers themselves. With regards to the complex question of authorship, two types of newspaper content are particularly valuable, namely letters addressed to newspaper editors, and editorial statements commenting specifically on such outside contributions. In an effort to build up an internal evidence base, I have explored letters and editorial statements from six daily London newspapers in the politically turbulent period 1790–92, which have been accessed through the digital Burney Collection and Times Digital Archive.<sup>1</sup> Due to the many conceptual and technological pitfalls of relying on digital searching across newspaper titles, I have relied instead on a more systematic reading of *all* issues of the newspapers for this period. However, as anyone who has studied late eighteenth-century English newspapers knows, the sheer wealth of material requires some form of limitation, and my unwillingness to rely too heavily on keyword searching has restricted the scope of my corpus both in terms of time period and newspaper titles.

Due to this article's overarching emphasis on public access to debate via newspapers, the important though admittedly restricted period from 1790 and 1792 is particularly worth exploring. This period saw some of the most heated political debates in English history. These discussions are commonly associated with a 'pamphlet war' between conservatives and radicals over the implications of the French Revolution for the British sociopolitical establishment. However, a great share of discussions took place in the newspaper press, especially in the early years of the controversy, before the outbreak of war between England and France in February 1793 limited dramatically the scope for genuine political discussion.

The decision to not rely primarily on distant database searches, but on systematic reading, has favoured the detailed exploration of a few selected newspapers at the expense of others. There are however several reasons for singling out these papers, most importantly because they were leading daily newspapers published in London, which was at the centre of the period's political debates. In 1790, 35 newspapers were published in London: 12 papers once a week (including the *London Gazette*, the official state paper), 9 papers three times a week, and 14 papers every morning or evening (Trusler 1790, 135-136). This study centres on the daily press: the six chosen papers were published every morning, except on Sundays. Daily publication of news was generally uncommon prior to the French Revolution, but in London, this had been the dominant news outlet for several decades (Popkin 1987-1988, 267; Harris 2009, 424).

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<sup>1</sup> These include the *Morning Chronicle*, *The Times*, the *Diary*, the *Public Advertiser*, the *Morning Post*, and the *World*.

Based on a systematic reading of these newspapers—specifically the internal evidence provided by their letters and editorial statements—this article explores different categories of newspaper contributors in this crucial period of English history. The evidence suggests that both elite and common authors had access to the newspaper platform, from leading politicians and government officials to disenfranchised subjects claiming a greater share in the governance of the country. This article focuses on two types of contributors who, broadly defined, could be grouped into two separate categories. The first were Members of Parliament aiming specifically to influence Parliament and public policy, and the second common citizens wishing to challenge not only specific policies, but also contemporary political, religious and social attitudes more broadly. By discussing what might have been their motivations and opportunities for newspaper publication during the revolutionary 1790s, the main objective of this article is to investigate how accessible the late eighteenth-century newspaper really was, and whether it could be said to have contributed to the gradual broadening of political participation and inclusion in this period.

### Members of Parliament

Letters purporting to be from Members of Parliament often appeared within the pages of the newspaper press.<sup>2</sup> These sometimes began with a justification of the chosen mode of communication. One politician, styling his letter to ‘the *speaker of House of Commons* [sic]’ rather than to the editor, noted that—as he was ‘confined in the country by an indisposition which precludes me from delivering my sentiments in the House of Commons’—he was ‘under the necessity of addressing you in this public manner’ (*Diary*, 6 Feb. 1792). Another gave a different reason for relying on the newspaper:

To the editor. Sir, though I have a seat in the House of Commons, you will not think it strange that I chuse this method of communicating my sentiments on a very important subject, when I tell you that I have no talent for public speaking, and am therefore unwilling to obtrude myself on the House.

(*MC*, 20 Dec. 1790)

Whether we believe these reasons or not, and indeed— whether we believe that these particular letters were written by actual Members of Parliament or not—surviving letters written to Henry Sampson Woodfall of the *Public Advertiser* prove that some were indeed authored by this type of correspondent, including the Earl of Sandwich, Horace Walpole and John Wilkes (Barker 2008; Dean 2006, 640).

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, letters in the *Morning Chronicle* 20 December 1790, 28 December 1790, and 14 January 1791, and the *Diary* 6 February 1792.

These correspondents were invaluable due to their privileged positions in the Houses of Lords and Commons, which enabled them to provide newspaper editors with political intelligence that would otherwise have been reserved for the privileged few. Because this information was of such great public interest and importance, and because newspaper proprietors wanted to avoid publishing false or seditious reports, they would typically attempt to authenticate the information by confirming the identity of correspondents claiming to be Members of Parliament.<sup>3</sup> Although editors were anxious to authenticate information received from anonymous correspondents, the powerful and influential would often be accommodated. When introducing the abovementioned letter from the MP lacking talent for public oratory, for instance, editors James Perry and James Gray of the *Morning Chronicle* noted how the letter had ‘so strong a claim to general Notice, that in the faithful discharge of our duty we bring it thus forward to the Public eye’ (20 Dec. 1790). The strong claim to public notice was probably to a great extent based on the authority of the author.

Indeed, these correspondents were so important to newspaper proprietors that their letters would be published even in situations where a lack of space forced editors to prioritize other material over political commentary. Unlike modern-day editors of online news, eighteenth-century editors were restricted by certain material and legal limitations, such as expensive paper, but also government taxation. This made newspaper production expensive, resulting in a standard folio format of two sheets, four pages and four columns per page, by the middle of the century (Harris 1978, 84). Space was thus limited, which was particularly unfortunate in times when there was no shortage of either news or commentary. During the turbulent 1790s, the flow of news from Paris, and the long reports from parliamentary debates at home, inspired commentary from readers. Inconveniently, however, as the volume of news grew, there was less room for opinion. As the editors of the *Morning Chronicle* explained to their correspondents, many contributions were ‘either under consideration, or wait only for an opportunity of insertion’ (8 Sept. 1791).

Nevertheless, there was a clear wish amongst readers to comment on current affairs, and not least an expectation that the newspapers would publish not only news but also political letters commenting on the news. This expectation was encouraged by a long tradition in England of political discussions in serialized form, aided by such genres as the weekly essay journal and the monthly magazine, the latter genre prospering from the 1730s onwards with the publication of Edward Cave’s popular *Gentleman’s Magazine* (Harris 1978, 95; Harris 1983, 44; Harris 2009, 428). From the 1760s, so-called ‘Advertisers’—daily newspapers prioritizing news and advertisements over political commentary—took over the leading role in the news market, but this does not mean that the demand for political letters waned, as demonstrated by the fact that newspapers continued to carry them (Slauter 2013, 53; Slauter 2015, 35; Pettegree 2018, 333).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See editorial notes in the *Public Advertiser* on 22 September 1791, in the *Morning Chronicle* on 26 January 1791, and on 24 May and 11 June 1792, and in the *Times* on 10 September 1795.

<sup>4</sup> According to Ian R. Christie, ‘discussions of public affairs ... formed one of the chief selling points of the newspaper press’. Christie 1970, 332.

Because there was an expectation that newspapers would not only report the news, but also include letters of political commentary in response to the news, editors tried to find room for the latter through various editorial innovations. They would, for instance, publish supplements, enlarge their columns, or experiment with new and more compact typesetting. Perry and Gray announced their intention of publishing ‘a supplemental sheet’ in order to combine a particularly detailed reporting of parliamentary debates with the wonted political commentary and other miscellaneous features, but such supplements were expensive and thus rarely pursued (*MC*, 27 Feb. 1792). Not only would it demand more compositors and pressmen to produce them, but stamp duties would force the prices up and repel potential buyers (Asquith 1973, 10-11; Asquith 1975, 711-712). In contrast, enlarging the columns of the regular paper or using a smaller type were much cheaper alternatives. In December 1794, Perry and Gray entreated their correspondents to ‘study brevity’, but added that they had ‘enlarged [their] Columns for their accommodation, that the Paper may preserve as much as possible, its characteristic miscellany’ (*MC*, 29 Dec. 1794). However, this too would involve greater costs, since compositors would spend longer setting the type and printing the paper. At 27 shillings a week, London printers already earned a decent wage (Popkin 1989, 102). Thus, such measures involved significant investment from newspaper proprietors, which they did not hesitate to point out to their readers (e.g. *MC*, 2 Feb. 1792).

In other words, editors were fighting a constant battle to balance content in order to meet reader demand and make a profit from their newspapers. Try as they might, it was impossible to include all the articles they received, even if they deemed them to be worthy of publication:

It is not in our power to notice every communication we receive, nor is it by any means from want of merit that some are laid aside. Daily occurrences allow but little room for miscellany: and for that little we endeavor to make the best selection we are able (*MC*, 11 Feb. 1795).

When editors selected their materials, commentary and miscellany were the features most frequently cut, because – as demonstrated by numerous editorial notices in the period – reporting the news and advertising goods and services were always the most important considerations.<sup>5</sup> Editors were often forced to point out that they could not ‘suffer letters to take place of news’, and one correspondent was told that he ‘must be aware if he sees the Papers at all, that it has not been in the Printer’s power to give place at present to his production’ (*MC*, 25 Jan.; and *Diary*, 19 March 1792). The editors of the *Morning Chronicle*

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, editorial notes in the *Morning Post* 25 March 1791; in the *Morning Chronicle* 20 August 1793; in the *Times* 18 February 1790, 30 May 1792, and 11 February 1795; and in the *World* 30 July 1791, 27 September 1791, and 3 March 1792.

asked their contributors whether they would ‘like us to publish essays rather than news’, suggesting that contributors had expressed frustration at failing to see their letters in print (23 Nov. 1792).

When choosing between various contributions, editors would typically reject letters perceived to be poorly written, too long, unoriginal (having appeared elsewhere) or dealing with topics not considered to be sufficiently interesting or newsworthy (see appendix). In particular, excessive length and lack of current relevance would lead to rejection, even in cases where editors considered the topic to be of public interest. Indeed, this was not just the case with political commentary from contributors, but also with other materials. For instance, when the editors of the *Morning Chronicle* were asked to reprint the important Brunswick manifesto—threatening the French revolutionaries with Austrian and Prussian intervention if King Louis XVI and his family were harmed—they refused to do so, because this ‘would fill more of our paper than can be given, except to articles new and temporary’ (12 Oct. 1792). In the aftermath of the greatest demonstration of popular loyalism and violence in England during the revolutionary 1790s – the Birmingham riots – a writer wished to ‘do away, by truth and argument, the ill impressions’ of a letter he had read in a local Birmingham paper (*The Retort Courteous*, v). His ‘remarks were at first intended for the Birmingham Chronicle’, where the letter in question had appeared, ‘but being too long for insertion in a Newspaper, is the reason for their appearance in the present form’, in other words, as a pamphlet (ibid).

In this competition for publicity, letters from leading politicians were often prioritized. Their *letters* were seldom on trifling matters, and they could provide the newspapers and their readers with essential intelligence. However, the underlying motivation was not necessarily to keep the people updated on political affairs. Often, politicians sought to influence public policy, or voters prior to elections. In other words, they addressed themselves towards the politically enfranchised who were part of the political establishment, and they found the newspaper to be a suitable medium to reach this intended audience.

In many instances, the MPs, or hirelings writing on their behalf, would attempt to influence policies directly, by addressing fellow officeholders on important parliamentary business. In order to achieve their objectives, timing was of the essence. As Frank O’Gorman has pointed out, the publication of Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was timed to coincide with the opening of the parliamentary season, and it greatly affected debates over the French Revolution in the months to come (1967, 55). Similarly, newspaper letters were timed to correspond with important business in Parliament, as shown in *The Times*, when the pseudonymous writer ‘Nestor’ urged Opposition MP Charles Grey to consider the dangers of proposing a parliamentary reform to extend the vote:



My purport ... is immediately to arrest your attention to a few serious remarks on the proposed Parliamentary Reform you mean to bring forward, when the House of Commons meets for the dispatch of business ... When we come to examine the consequences of putting such a plan into practice, we find that it radically strikes at the existence of our Constitution. Indeed, we have a melancholy proof that it does so, in the present deplorable state of France: and, while we have such a scene before our eyes, it would be criminal in our hearts not to be warned by the example (1 Nov. 1792).

That Members of Parliament were the primary addressees of many newspaper letters is further evinced by an editorial note in the *Times* informing one of its correspondents that his letter would be 'better timed some weeks hence, when the season begins to open' (16 Feb. 1795). However, MPs sought to influence not only their peers, but also that wider and less tangible political force: 'public opinion'. It is notoriously difficult to determine how newspaper texts may in fact have influenced this broader public opinion. There is, however, no doubt that a large portion of newspaper letters sought to do so, either directly—especially immediately prior to elections—or more indirectly, by attempting to influence not only political decisions, but the broader currents of contemporary political thought. This was an important motivation of another significant group of political writers in the period, namely the disenfranchised contributors lacking sufficient authority and power to influence political decisions from within the established political system.

### **Extra-parliamentary contributors**

The discussion so far may give the impression that newspapers were only accessible to the privileged elite. At first sight, it may indeed appear as though the late eighteenth-century London press could not provide much space for authors on the fringes of society, who wanted to participate in discussions of important public affairs. This was not just because of the strong presence of elite authors, but also because of the widespread partisanship of the London press in the late eighteenth century, when virtually all the newspapers received financial backing from leading politicians in the Administration or the Opposition. Naturally, this often favoured the viewpoints of the governing elite.

Although this should not be overlooked as a possible impediment for broader public participation in newspaper debates, scholars have moved away from the reductive focus that dominated scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century (Aspinall 1949/1973; Werkmeister 1963, 1967). Instead of representing newspapers as merely the personal playground of scheming politicians, scholarship from the 1970s onwards has increasingly emphasized the commercial and entrepreneurial aspects of the newspaper business. Importantly, scholars agree that revenue from newspaper advertising constituted a far

greater source of profit than political subsidies, thus affording a higher degree of independence from political control (Morison 1935, 21; Clare 1963, 103; Asquith 1975, 704; Asquith 1978, 110-111; Harris 2009, 432; Schweizer 2006, 35; Schweizer and Klein 1985, 85; Gardner 2014, 296; Gardner 2016, 9, 16; and Gardner and Adelman 2015, 48).

As noted by Ivon Asquith, income from political subsidies was ‘negligible compared to the income that could be gained from advertisements’ (1975, 704). To secure this crucial revenue, newspapers had to attract advertising customers, and because advertisers wished to place their ads in the papers with the most substantial circulation, sales were important (Asquith 1978, 114; Barker 2000, 97; and Gardner 2014, 296). Indeed, proprietors would often quarrel amongst themselves about who had the most significant circulation. *The Times* was particularly vocal about its extensive sales in the period, noting on several occasions that its circulation was greater than that of any other morning paper, except the *Daily Advertiser*.<sup>6</sup> The proprietors pointed explicitly to their high sales in order to attract advertising customers, noting how ‘advertisers must derive a superior benefit from making it the vehicle of their communications to the Public’ (*Times*, 2 Oct. 1790).

High circulation figures were clearly important in order to attract advertising customers. In order to attract *readers*, however, a newspaper depended on the quality of its news coverage. Thus, in times when the pressure of events was great, proprietors would prioritize news even to the exclusion of advertisements.<sup>7</sup> News was particularly prioritized after significant newsbreaks or during the parliamentary season. Proprietors sought to appease advertising customers, by stating that it ‘must be evident to them ... that they are ultimately benefited by us thus extending the sale of the Paper in circles of fashion’ (*MC*, 31 March 1791). They sought to entice advertisers by promising that, ‘if their Advertisements be of moderate length, they shall appear in the same papers, which contain sketches of the most interesting Debates in Parliament’ (*Diary*, 6 and 20 Feb. 1792). This, however, was a careful balancing act. There was less room for advertisements during the parliamentary season, but this was exactly when advertising customers were most eager to place their ads. Proprietors depended on advertising revenue, but without paying due attention to public affairs, they would lose readers, and there would be less value for advertising customers to place their ads in the paper.

However, if proprietors wished to attract readers, it was not sufficient to provide a competent news coverage. In order not to alienate potential readers, a newspaper had to at least appear to be sympathetic to a range of viewpoints on political and other matters. Importantly, newspaper proprietors did not necessarily share the political stances

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<sup>6</sup> See the *Times*, 23 January 1790, 18 August 1790, 20 April 1792, 24 November 1792, 11 December 1792, 17 December 1792, 29 November 1793, and 1 January 1795. According to a contemporary guidebook, the *Daily Advertiser* was among the papers with the most extensive sales in 1790 (Trusler 1790, 136).

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, the *Times* 23 March 1790, 3 May 1790, and 27 January 1792.



expressed in the letters from their correspondents. Editors were often unwilling to take personal responsibility for the political views they expressed: having received criticism for publishing a letter contrasting with the political profile of the *Morning Chronicle*, Perry and Gray explained that they were ‘certainly ... not answerable for the doctrines of our Correspondents’ (5 Jan. 1792).

Importantly, however, newspapers would typically be less inclusive of a range of political viewpoints in times of political turbulence. Ministerial papers were particularly careful not to print anything that might be considered offensive, especially as the Revolution Controversy intensified. This hampered opportunities for genuine debate within single titles. However, debate between commentators with contrasting views was facilitated in a more indirect fashion, when their letters were published in newspapers with conflicting political stances. Moreover, editors of Opposition papers were typically more open to including a broader range of opinion, especially if the editors held strong and genuine political convictions themselves. This was certainly the case for James Perry of the *Morning Chronicle*. As an ardent supporter of the Foxite Whigs, he was hardly neutral in political affairs (*MC*, 13 Dec. 1790; Smith, 2004; Asquith 1973, 39). Like most of his rivals, he received financial support from politicians, but he distinguished himself by his genuine and consistent political convictions, despite having to swim against the tide of public opinion for most of the 1790s.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, almost thirty years later, he was still considered to be ‘incorruptible’ (Christie 1970, 357).

Perry’s political convictions made him more sympathetic to genuine political discussion than many of his more unprincipled rivals, and he often stressed that he was open to contrasting viewpoints. Readers were assured that ‘on every topic that comes before the popular tribunal, the *Morning Chronicle* shall ever be open to liberal discussion’, and that, because it was his ‘wish to make the *Morning Chronicle* the vehicle’ for public discussions, ‘both parties may be sure of our endeavours to make room for their essays’ (*MC*, 19 Sept. and 22 Oct. 1792). Perry and Gray would ‘never, in the maintenance of their own opinions, forget that other gentlemen may entertain opposite sentiments from conviction and motives as pure as their own’ (*MC*, 13 Dec. 1790).

However, although there was clearly an opportunity for a broader debate to take place in the newspapers, it would be a stretch to claim that many people from the lower orders were capable of competing for the limited space available in newspapers, unless they could provide new information or their letters were unusually well written. Although they were few and far between, such writers existed, as exemplified by the plebeian autodidact Thomas

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<sup>8</sup> Writing in the 1830s, one of Perry’s contemporaries reflected that ‘[w]hatever were his qualities as a writer or a man, he had at least the merit of political consistency’ (Taylor 1833, 141). Scholars have also noted both his political consistency and honesty (Haig 1960, 187-217; Aspinall 1945, 221; Asquith 1973, 34; Christie 1970, 318, 329, 337, 357).

Holcroft, who was a close personal friend of James Perry (Smith 2004; and Holcroft and Hazlitt 1816, 293-300). In October 1794, when accused of High Treason, Holcroft wrote a letter from Newgate, and published it in the *Morning Chronicle*, correcting a formulation that had appeared in one of its trial reports (*MC*, 9 Oct. 1794). He felt the report had given the impression that he had admitted to the crime of which he was accused, and he took this opportunity to correct the mistake.

Holcroft was obviously unrepresentative for the lower orders in general. However, the radical intelligentsia of the period consisted of other self-improved plebeian artisans, such as the shoemaker Thomas Hardy, whose political zeal had been encouraged in the 1780s by reading reformist pamphlets. Although he did not admit it upon its launch, he was the founder and secretary of the radical artisan London Corresponding Society. Interestingly, the LCS general committee passed a resolution in August 1792, urging that 'no Delegate, no member of the Society do presume to *publish* or send to any newspaper, any letter or pamphlet or writing connected to the society ... unless by express order from the Committee under the penalty of exclusion' (Qtd. in Mee 2016, 78). Jon Mee suggests that this resolution was prompted by the publication and dissemination of an implicitly republican broadside song entitled *God Save the Rights of Man* (2016, 78). Although some of its members were decidedly republican, the LCS leadership wanted to avoid being associated with republicanism.

For our purposes, the value of this resolution lies in its links between the plebeian society with the newspaper press. That LCS members had printed and distributed radical broadside songs comes as no surprise, given the fact that this was a form of cheap print usually associated with a popular audience. More significant is the phrasing of the resolution that prohibits the members from sending letters purporting to be official publications of the LCS. Surely, this suggests that getting such published was not impossible or even uncommon in the period. Nevertheless, in the great scheme of things, Holcroft and Hardy were anomalous, exceptions to the rule, and it is unlikely that any significant proportion of the English lower orders were either consumers or producers of newspaper texts. We should be careful, however, not to underestimate the contributions of those who *did* in fact contribute. Their relative marginality in terms of numbers, when measured against the total number of plebeian subjects, should not cause us to downplay their significance.

Moreover, there were others who were equally excluded from the political establishment, despite not belonging to the poorest classes. In oligarchic eighteenth-century England, most people were barred from what today we consider to be basic civil rights, including religious minorities; women; and not least the expanding middle classes who represented a growing movement of people with the means and motivation to challenge existing conceptions of political, religious and social rights. This latter group received much publicity in the newspaper press.

In January and February 1791, a series of letters signed 'A Tradesman' was published in the *Morning Chronicle*. Keeping in mind the fact that pseudonyms were not always genuine, the letters nonetheless clearly represented the interests of the commercially driven middle classes, whom scholars have particularly identified with late eighteenth-century newspaper readership. Opening his letter by stating that he did 'not think [himself] qualified or entitled from his station' to enter into political discussions, the tradesman proceeded to pointing his 'fellow-citizens' to an important matter affecting people of his situation, namely 'the vexatious and oppressive mode of levying [taxes]' (*MC*, 14 Jan. 1791). The resentment against taxes and duties was typical for this category of newspaper author. Based on personal experience, the tradesman discussed this issue in three lengthy letters, the last of which was published twice, indicating perhaps its perceived importance by the editors. The final letter concluded with a remark suggesting a different kind of politics from the one discussed above:

Let me seriously ask my fellow citizens if this is the way in which the revenue ought to be collected? Can it be thought that the British Manufacturers are an unobservant, as well as a timid race of men ...? We are daily told of the sacred nature of establishments, but we groan under the weight of them; while stretching forth our view to America, we see the relief of the people from taxes is the first fruit of the over throw of establishments ... I am no partyman, and this is no party subject. But there are serious truths, which sooner or later, must come forcibly home to the bosoms of the men for whose benefit establishments are maintained (28 Jan., republished 2 Feb. 1791).

This transgressive, extra-parliamentary rhetoric contrasts sharply with that used in letters aimed primarily at members of the political elite, demonstrating that contributions from authors who were barred from exerting direct political influence could indeed find an outlet in newspapers of the period.

## **Conclusion**

Anyone wishing to explore the complex relationship between newspapers and public debate in the revolutionary 1790s needs to address the question of accessibility, not only in terms of readership but also with regards to authorship. Who were able to contribute to newspapers at a crucial moment of political debate in England? How open was the newspaper press to contributions from authors with differing social backgrounds?

This article is an attempt to fill some of the gaps in our knowledge about this important topic. Through a systematic reading of internal newspaper evidence in the form of letters to, and statements from, newspaper editors, it identifies two broadly defined groups of

newspaper authors in the significant albeit limited period 1790-1792. This evidence suggests that authors could come from both within and beyond the established orders. Despite the considerable limitation on space in newspapers of the 1790s letters continued to be published, and they constituted a large proportion of many newspapers' commentary on current affairs. Letters from powerful and influential individuals would typically be published not only because newspaper proprietors received political subsidies, but also because these authors could provide inside information on matters that were considered to be of great public interest. However, because newspapers needed to appeal to as large an audience as possible in order to sell copies and attract advertisers, they had to be fairly inclusive of different points of view, and this opened up opportunities for people outside of the governing elite to voice their opinions in the press. Newspapers thus greatly facilitated the exchange of political opinion, and they could therefore be said to have contributed significantly to the gradual broadening of political participation and inclusion in this period.

The findings of this paper are not meant as a final word or definitive statement about newspaper contribution or newspaper accessibility in the late eighteenth century. I have conducted a systematic reading of a limited corpus in order to get a better understanding of who might have had the opportunity to participate and contribute to newspaper debates in the period. Much research, however, remains to be done. Future studies might expand the parameters for the study in terms of time, geography and scope, by including more newspapers from a larger area over a longer time span. Such an internal evidence base, which is more readily available than ever before due to large-scale digitization of historical newspapers, could be explored in fruitful conjunction with supporting extra-textual material. The lack of surviving relevant sources complicates matters greatly, but serendipitous discoveries of mentions of newspaper contribution in private diaries and letters; published memoirs; or public business records could throw important light on the matter.

Finally, much work remains to be done on the various uses of the press by different types of contributors and for different purposes. This paper focuses specifically on the political uses of the press by both elite and disenfranchised groups, but the use of the press by commercial and manufacturing lobbies – such as for instance the West Indian Planters and Merchants – remains an overlooked area of study (Harris 1996, 106). It seems clear that late-eighteenth-century newspapers enabled a range of uses for different groups of authors, whether their ambitions were to exchange political ideas in a public forum, or to promote their own commercial or political interests.

## Appendix: Editorial notes stating reasons for rejecting letters

### A. Rejected due to excessive length:

The *Times*, 17 May 1791:

'The Letter to the Bishop of St. DAVID'S is too long for present insertion, when so many other temporary subjects occupy our attention'.

'The Letter of ARCADUS is received, but we fear the continuation of his correspondence would be too long for the present state of this Paper'.

The *Morning Chronicle*, 30 January 1792:

'That we may preserve to the readers of the MORNING CHRONICLE, the space necessary for an ample and regular Report of the Proceedings in Parliament, we intreat our Correspondents on miscellaneous subjects, to be as brief as possible in their communications'.

The *Diary*, 20 February 1792:

'The Writer of the Letter signed Humanitas, seems to expect that the Printer is to give up attention to all his other engagements in his preference. The length of his Letter, if there were no other, is a sufficient obstacle to its appearance at present'.

The *Morning Chronicle*, 23 May 1792:

'We should be glad to oblige SCÆVOLA, but it is impossible for us, during the Session of Parliament, to promise the insertion of so long a letter on any particular day'.

The *Morning Chronicle*, 13 November 1792:

'We cannot promise to give REPUBLICANUS a place for so long a letter speedily. Events crowd upon us so fast, that our Correspondents must indulge us with time'.

The *Morning Chronicle*, 20 January 1794:

'As it is our peculiar duty, in times so critical as the present, to give full details of the Proceedings in Parliament, we intreat our Correspondents to give us indulgence in the publication of their favours; and we recommend to them the utmost possible brevity'.

### B. Rejected due to having appeared elsewhere:

The *Morning Post*, 6 September 1791:

'The lines signed PHILENIA have our full praise and admission, as far as respects their Merits, but, if we are not greatly mistaken, they have already met the Public eye through another Channel'.

The *Star*, 31 December 1791:

'Lines on a Young Lady, from another VERITAS, having appeared elsewhere, are inadmissible'.

The *Star*, 20 August 1791:

'SCRIPTON or CARPAX is informed, that we never insert what has been *offered* elsewhere'.

The *World*, 25 July 1791:

'The Letter addressed to Mr. PRIESTLEY, should have been inserted in the WORLD of this day, had it not in part previously appeared in another paper'.

### **C. Rejected due to not being sufficiently newsworthy or interesting:**

*The Times*, 26 January 1790:

'The "BLACK JOKE" to LORD DUCIE, should have insertion, had not the subject been rather too old'.

*The Times*, 29 June 1791:

'The Letter of XIMENES has been already anticipated by the Remarks which have frequently appeared in this Paper'.

*The Times*, 23 August 1791:

'The Letter of AMICUS PATRIÆ, on the Subject of Prostitution, we have no doubt is extremely well meant, but it furnishes no new Ideas on the Subject'.

The *Morning Post*, 4 November 1791:

'ANTI-TYRANT has been received, but as it is not marked by any peculiar novelty or force of sentiments, its length would make its publication inconvenient. – It is left at the Office for the Writer'.

*The Times*, 20 January 1795:

'CURSORY REFLECTIONS ON THE WAR are extremely fit for publication; but we are sorry that a variety of prior remarks on the same subject will preclude us from inserting those in question'.

'The Letter to Lord HOWE has been delayed for want of room. It is now too late to insert it'.

*The Times*, 28 February 1795:

'D. H. W. we are obliged to, and the examination shall be attended to; but the letter is too long on a trifling subject in our present press of matter'.

*The Times*, 13 June 1795:

'The Letter signed a PHILANTHROPIST is not sufficiently interesting for publication'.



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