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Newspaper Debates in Late Eighteenth-Century England: 'Letters to the Editor' versus the Political Pamphlet

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ABSTRACT

When exploring contributions to political debates in late eighteenth-century England, scholars have typically favoured non-serialized publications, most commonly the pamphlet, thus neglecting the many contributions appearing in the periodical press. This article redresses this oversight by exploring both the shortcomings and the advantages of the newspaper as a medium for political debate in this period. Based on a close reading of leading London newspapers from the politically turbulent years of 1791–95, this article explores the following questions: What advantages did the newspaper have over stand-alone publications such as the political pamphlet? What type of audience were writers of political newspaper commentary trying to reach, and what barriers did they encounter when attempting to do so? Why did the newspaper supplant the non-serialized pamphlet as the leading medium for political debate towards the end of the eighteenth century?

KEYWORDS

serial publication, letters to the editor, pamphlets, newspapers, political commentary, eighteenth century, revolution controversy

Introduction

On 14 July 1791, a crowd of Birmingham artisans attacked a group of middle-class reformers who had gathered at a public hotel to commemorate the second anniversary of the storming of the Bastille. Among the chief victims of the Birmingham riots was the scientist and political reformer Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), whose property was completely demolished in the attack. Priestley managed to escape from his persecutors and seek shelter with friends in London. A week after the riots, a letter bearing his signature appeared in the leading London newspaper the *Morning Chronicle*, and was immediately reprinted in many of the London dailies and triweeklies.[1] In this letter, Priestley informed the public that he was alive, but had suffered great losses in the riots. Moreover, he launched an attack on his political enemies, blaming them for inciting popular violence against him.

Priestley's letter formed part of an established genre of political discourse in the late eighteenth century known as the 'letter to the editor'. Not all such letters to newspaper editors were of a political nature; others dealt with issues ranging from education, street lighting, and Sunday schools, to boxing matches, theatre performances, and exotic fruits. As fascinating as these other types of letters may be, this article is concerned primarily with political letters to newspaper editors. Although the study of political discourse in this period has typically centred on individual authors and specific stand-alone texts, particularly the political pamphlet, Bob Harris — along with, more recently, Victoria Gardner and Joseph Adelman — has argued that this format declined over the course of the eighteenth century because newspaper letters were perceived to be 'a more pervasive — and persuasive — means of reaching the public'.[2] However, little sustained attention has been given to possible reasons for the increasing dominance of newspapers as media for political debate in this period.

This article explores the comparative advantages of the English newspaper as a medium for political debate vis-à-vis the non-serialized pamphlet in the turbulent years following the outbreak of the French Revolution. This limited but extremely important period is usually associated with a 'pamphlet war' between those who supported and those who opposed the revolutionary changes taking place in France. However, a great share of discussions took place in the many daily and triweekly newspapers, which can now be accessed through digitized newspaper archives such as Gale's Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Burney Newspapers Collection and the Times Digital Archive. When exploring the social accessibility of newspapers as a forum for public debate, I have in previous studies presupposed that political writers considered the newspaper

1 The letter appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* on 20 July 1791. According to available sources in the Burney Collection at the British Library, the letter was reprinted at least in the following London papers: the *Times*, the *World*, the *Public Advertiser*, the *Diary*, and the *Star* (dailies), and in the *Evening Mail*, the *General Evening Post*, the *London Chronicle*, and the *Whitehall Evening Post* (triweeklies).

2 Bob Harris, *Politics and the Rise of the Press: Britain and France, 1620–1800* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996), p. 38; Victoria Gardner and Joseph Adelman, 'News in the Age of Revolution', in *Making News: The Political Economy of Journalism in Britain and America from the Glorious Revolution to the Internet*, ed. by Richard R. John and Jonathan Silberstein-Loeb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 47–72 (p. 54). Studies favouring the political pamphlet include Marilyn Butler, *Burke, Paine, Godwin, and the Revolution Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Gregory Claeys, *Political Writings of the 1790s* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1995); Gregory Claeys, *The French Revolution Debate in Britain: The Origins of Modern Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Iain Hampsher-Monk, *The Impact of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Pamela Clemit, *The Cambridge Companion to British Literature of the French Revolution in the 1790s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

as a desirable outlet for their work.[3] But this begs another question: why would they want to publish their texts in the newspapers? Why not choose another medium, more specifically the political pamphlet? Based on a rigorous study of editorial notes to writers of political commentary and close readings of eighteenth-century 'letters to the editor' from 1791–95, this article argues that, despite some drawbacks inherent in serial publications, Joseph Priestley and other political commentators were drawn to this form because the newspaper could provide instant publication and an efficient way to reach a relatively large and diverse audience. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the 'letter to the editor' thus emerged as an increasingly powerful medium for public debate.

Lack of Space, Speed of Communication, and Ephemerality

In contrast to pamphlets, newspapers posed significant challenges that could deter writers. A particular challenge was the restricted space available for newspaper commentary. Government taxation and the high cost of paper set material limits for newspaper entrepreneurs in the period, resulting in a standard folio format of two sheets and four pages, with four columns per page, by the middle of the century.[4] Newspaper editors typically urged their readers to keep letters as short and concise as possible, in order for them to be incorporated alongside news, advertisements, and other features.[5]

Lack of space for political commentary on current affairs was a problem recognized by both contributors and editors. In the aftermath of the Birmingham riots, one commentator promised to continue his line of argument in a subsequent letter because he feared that his letter had 'already transgressed the bounds of moderation that ought to limit a newspaper publication'.[6] Editors would often reject letters due to excessive length, even when they considered them worthy of publication, and sometimes they would encourage authors to publish them in another format, as a pamphlet, for instance:

> We are much indebted to the Gentleman who has favoured us with a very valuable account of the present state of Kentucky; but as it is impossible for us to devote so large a portion of the Paper to the subject, we submit to him, whether it would not be advisable to collect all the information of which he is possessed, and publish it in the shape of a Pamphlet.[7]

In addition to space constraints, the need to keep up with the pace of daily publication meant that there was less time and opportunity for serious and comprehensive discussion in response to current events. This is reflected in many letter titles, such as William Godwin's 'Cursory Strictures' on the 1794 trials of radicals for High Treason, published anonymously in the *Morning Chronicle* and later in the form of a pamphlet, which

3 Johanne Kristiansen, 'Who Contributed to Late-Eighteenth-Century English Newspapers? Authorship, Accessibility and Public Debate (1790–92)', *Authorship*, 8 (2019), 1–17; Johanne Slettvoll Kristiansen, 'The Financing of Political Newspaper Commentary in Late Eighteenth-Century England: Who Paid for the "Letter to the Editor"?', *Media History* (2020).

4 Michael Harris, 'The Structure, Ownership and Control of the Press, 1620–1780', in *Newspaper History: From the 17th Century to the Present Day*, ed. by George Boyce, James Curran, and Pauline Wingate (London: Constable, 1978), pp. 82–97 (p. 84).

5 See 'To Correspondents', *Times* (28 May 1791), [2]; 'London: Monday, January 30', *Morning Chronicle* (30 January 1792), [2]; 'To Our Correspondents', *Diary* (20 February 1792), [2]; 'London: Wednesday, May 23', *Morning Chronicle* (23 May 1792), [2]; 'London: Tuesday, November 13', *Morning Chronicle* (13 November 1792), [2]; London: Monday, January 20', *Morning Chronicle* (20 January 1794), [2].

6 A Constitutional Whig, 'Riot at Birmingham — To the conductor of The Times', *Times* (2 August 1791), [1].

7 'We are much indebted', *Morning Chronicle* (24 January 1792), [3].

suggests that the author had time for only a hasty and superficial treatment of the subject.[8] Another writer explained that 'As I write amidst the bustle of a Coffee-room, you must look for no studied accuracy'.[9] Naturally, this haste often affected the quality of the composition.

This problem was exacerbated by the hustle and bustle of newspaper production. The pressures of daily publication often caused compositors to disarrange the type, or they struggled to interpret the handwriting of the manuscripts, resulting in numerous typographical errors. The editor of the *World* noted that one writer's letter had 'puzzled [him] compleatly', and that he could 'neither decypher his letter, nor guess at his meaning — should he in future wish to attract our attention, he must write legibly'.[10] Such problems often resulted in illogical or bewildering texts, as exemplified by a proslavery letter signed 'Philo-Detector' and published in the *Morning Chronicle* in the spring of 1792. Here, the famous American abolitionist Anthony Benezet's name became 'Anthony Reuczet', and Philo-Detector's charge against the abolitionists — blaming them for inciting the slave revolt erupting in Saint-Domingue the preceding year — was distorted when the word 'not' was mistaken for the word 'cut':

> That [the abolitionists seek to disprove] that their writings or emissaries were sent for the purpose of exciting the Negroes to the massacres and murders they have committed, we allow: but they will hardly have the effrontery to deny, they have not found their way there, and were cut, written, and sent for that purpose.[11]

These mistakes distorted the intended arguments of the author. As an erratum accompanied his next letter, Philo-Detector seems to have complained to the editors.[12]

A further challenge of newspapers was their ephemeral nature. Printed on cheap paper and consisting mainly of content with only temporary relevance, they were not intended to last. Newspapers were less likely to be bound in annual volumes than pamphlets and other serial publications, such as magazines and review periodicals, and thus seemed to hold less value than other serials, which were better preserved. In the prospectus of the first issue of the *Watchman*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge noted that, although the publication would be published 'as regularly as a Newspaper', it would have several advantages over that genre. One advantage was that its form allowed purchasers to bind it up 'at the end of the year [into] an Annual Register', and Coleridge expected that 'this last circumstance may induce Men of Letters to prefer this Miscellany to more perishable publications, as the vehicle of their effusions'.[13]

Moreover, it was common practice for eighteenth-century publishers to extract political letters and essays from various newspapers and periodicals, and create their own, more lasting anthologies, which were then advertised in London newspapers. One such anthology, the *Weekly Amusement*, was advertised in the *London Chronicle*,

8 William Godwin, 'Cursory Strictures on the Charge Delivered by Lord Chief Justice Eyre to the Grand Jury', *Morning Chronicle* (21 October 1794), [1–3]; William Godwin, *Cursory Strictures on the Charge Delivered by the Lord Chief Justice Eyre to the Grand Jury, October 2, 1794* (London: D. I. Eaton, 1794).

9 Clericus, 'For the Morning Chronicle', *Morning Chronicle* (18 August 1795), [2].

10 'To Correspondents', *World* (21 September 1791), [2].

11 Philo-Detector, 'To the Editor of the Morning Chronicle. Letter 1', *Morning Chronicle* (12 March 1792), [4].

12 Philo-Detector, 'To the Editor of the Morning Chronicle', *Morning Chronicle* (19 March 1792), [4].

13 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'Prospectus', *On Friday, the 5th Day of February, 1796, Will Be Published […] a Miscellany, to be Published Every Eighth day, Under the Name of the Watchman* (London: 1796), pp. 3–4 (p. 4).

Public Advertiser, and *Lloyd's Evening Post* from January through August 1765.[14] Prospective readers were informed in these newspaper advertisements that 'The Weekly Amusement, which has been so well received by the Public, continues to be published every Saturday', and that it would consist of

> an Extract of all the Letters of a Public Nature which appear from time to time in the Gazetteer, the Public Advertiser, the Public Ledger, the St. James's and London Chronicle, the London Evening Post, and other Papers. So that Gentlemen in the Country may thereby be informed, at a very small Expence, of all that is published of a Public Nature in the London Papers.[15]

The practice was still common in the 1790s and beyond, as exemplified by the long-running and successful *Spirit of the Public Journals*. This annual compilation, founded and edited by Stephen Jones in 1797 and running until 1825, specialized in extracting 'the most exquisite essays and jeux d'esprits, principally prose, that appear in the newspapers and other publications'.[16] According to the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Jones was acquainted with the newspaper genre: while editing this publication, he was also involved in the production of the *Whitehall Evening Post* and the *General Evening Post*. He was thus well aware of the shortcomings intrinsic to newspapers, in particular their composite nature and transience, and he made sure to point this out when advertising the *Spirit of the Public Journals*. He had selected the letters from 'an enormous mass of chaotic matter', and his publication would ensure that these texts were 'rescued from oblivion'.[17]

Due to the ephemerality of the newspaper medium and the haste characterizing production, it is not surprising that some of the most successful letters published in newspapers of the period were later revised and republished in the form of pamphlets, with accompanying notes describing elements that had been improved. One example already noted was Godwin's 'Cursory Strictures'. Other examples include the letters of 'A Calm Observer' (*Morning Chronicle*, 20 July 1792–25 June 1793), which attacked the Pitt Ministry and the coalition against France, and the letters of 'Hampden' (*Morning Chronicle*, 22 August–28 October 1794), which criticized the apostasy of Pitt and the Duke of Portland from the cause of parliamentary reform.[18]

Reworking newspaper letters into pamphlets was another way of rescuing texts 'from oblivion', as noted by the editors of the *Morning Chronicle*, James Perry and James Gray, when advertising the pamphlet version of the letters of A Calm Observer. The letters were written by the political reformer Benjamin Vaughan, recently elected MP for Calne, and were recognized for their quality.[19] Despite placing great emphasis on the fact that the letters were originally published in the *Morning Chronicle*, Perry

14 *Lloyd's Evening Post* (31 December 1764–2 January 1765; 1–4 March 1765), [12]; *Public Advertiser* (19 August 1765), [3]; *London Chronicle* (20–22 August 1765), [5].

15 *Lloyd's Evening Post* (1–4 March 1765), [2].

16 Stephen Jones, *The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1797. Being an Impartial Selection of the Most Exquisite Essays and Jeux d'Esprits, Principally Prose, That Appear in the Newspapers and Other Publications* (London: R. Phillips, 1798).

17 Jones, pp. iii, v.

18 A Calm Observer, *Letters, On the Subject of the Concert of Princes, and the Dismemberment of Poland and France. First Published in the Morning Chronicle between July 20, 1792, and June 25, 1793. With Corrections and Additions* (London: G. G. J. & J. Robinson, 1793); Hampden, *Letters to the Duke of Portland, On his Dereliction of the Cause of the People. First Published in the Morning Chronicle* (London: J. Ridgway, 1794).

19 Ivon Asquith, 'James Perry and the Morning Chronicle, 1790–1821' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, 1973), p. 26. See the entry for Benjamin Vaughan in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

and Gray nevertheless drew attention to the fact that they were now 'published in a form in which they will be read and admired, when the mode in which they were first communicated is forgotten'.[20]

As we have seen, it was not unusual for material in pamphlets to have been originally published in a newspaper, but the reverse was just as common. Materials from other publications were routinely copied at the time without providing the original source. This makes it difficult to determine provenance: the letters appearing in newspapers may be original, but could also have appeared somewhere else, either in a competing newspaper or in another form of publication altogether. A writer of a letter to the *Public Advertiser*, for instance, 'having seen a letter in your yesterday's paper', pointed out that this was originally published 'in a small anonymous pamphlet, out of which your correspondent has extracted it'.[21] In other words, it may have been just as difficult for contemporary readers as for modern scholars to determine textual provenance. A nota bene in Jones's *Spirit of the Public Journals* supports this conclusion. Informing readers that 'several errors may have been made [...] in ascribing the articles to the various publications whence they have been taken', Jones explained that, in some cases, the difficulty arose from the fact that he had been 'forced to depend upon memory', but in others, he had 'probably mistaken borrowed articles for originals'.[22]

In summary, the speed demanded from both authors and newspaper staff, the lack of space to elaborate ideas and arguments, and the ephemerality of newspapers all contributed to the decreasing appeal of this genre as a publication outlet for political commentators of the period. Publishing texts as 'letters to the editor' could result in errors and drawbacks that were inseparable from the context of newspaper publishing, due especially to the pressures of daily publication.

Paradoxically, however, this high pace of publication was in many ways what made the newspaper so enticing for many writers. By the 1790s, daily newspapers dominated the London news market, and daily publication provided an unprecedented opportunity for political commentators to get their texts published and read while their topics were still fresh. In February 1789, in the midst of the contentious Regency debates, Lord North urged William Adam, the manager of the Whig Opposition fund, to

> [e]mploy immediately some good Political Writer (if you have any) to State in a concise & forcible Manner to the Public the Nature & possible Consequences of the resumption Clause in the Regency Bill [...] your Writer should set about his Work immediately while the minds of Men are occupied by the Subject.[23]

Similarly, during the fierce Revolution Debates of the early 1790s, it was important to strike while the iron was hot. One author writing to the *Times* under the signature of 'The spirit of Jonathan Swift' explained that his motives arose out of 'a true patriotic love for our most excellent Constitution', and that he wished 'to counteract the operation of those poisonous pamphlets, Letters and Paragraphs which are with such industry dispersed among the lower class of mankind, for the purpose of making them dissatisfied with the blessings they enjoy'.[24] Many writers clearly saw the daily newspapers as suitable platforms for spreading their messages quickly, as demonstrated by a writer in the *Morning Post*:

20 'Letters', *Morning Chronicle* (18 July 1793), [2].
21 Thomas Coke, *Public Advertiser* (2 March 1792), [1].
22 Jones, p. vi.
23 Lord North to William Adam, 12 February 1789, quoted in Donald E. Ginter, 'The Financing of the Whig Party Organization', *American Historical Review*, 71 (1966), 421–40 (p. 435).
24 The Spirit of Jonathan Swift, 'The Constitution versus Reformation', *Times* (10 September 1791), [3].

> The following Narrative is not intended for sale, much less for a republication, otherwise it would appear in a different dress, properly embellished and made up into a Pamphlet: — Its purport is merely to do away the bad impressions which a late scandalous report might have made, or may make *hereafter*, on some Catholic families.[25]

The writer was Arthur O'Leary, a Roman Catholic priest and a strong advocate for religious toleration, who clearly feared that the scandalous report would injure his cause. In his letter, he revealed an express purpose to influence debates and ideas while they were still forming, and the opportunity of prompt publication induced him to send his letter to a daily newspaper instead of publishing it in the form of a 'properly embellished' pamphlet. Similarly, when Godwin published his 'Cursory Strictures', time was of the essence. The 'Strictures' were an attempt to counter the controversial charge that Lord Chief Justice Sir James Eyre presented to the Grand Jury, which Godwin and many other liberal and radical commentators considered highly prejudicial to the accused. Godwin hoped to influence the jury and, no doubt, a larger reading audience in favour of the prisoners.

Godwin's 'Cursory Strictures' have been regarded as decisive for the outcome of the treason trials: by helping Thomas Erskine mount his defence, they may have helped secure the acquittals of the radical reformers. John Barrell has argued that Godwin 'anticipated Erskine' in showing just how weak the prosecution's case for constructive treason was.[26] If it was enough to simply *imagine* (rather than intend) the king's death in order to be charged with High Treason, then anyone engaging in such imaginative acts, voluntarily or not, risked prosecution. By publishing his strictures in the *Morning Chronicle* prior to the trials, Godwin 'probably ensured that no one interested in the outcome of the trials could contemplate them without that question in their minds'.[27]

Whether or not Godwin's 'Strictures' were indeed crucial in determining the outcome of the trials, many contemporaries certainly believed that they were. Perry and Gray were criticized for publishing them prior to the trials, as this was regarded as an attempt to sway the jury. The editors thus felt compelled to justify their controversial decision in a statement to their readers:

> We have been questioned by several friends with whom we differ on political subjects, but whose liberality in discussion makes their opinions respectable, why we permitted Strictures on the Charge of Chief Justice Eyre to be published in the Chronicle *pending the trials* — we owe it to them and to all liberal critics to state our reasons.[28]

With a critical nod to their rivals, the *Times* asked correspondents to defer their comments on the treason trials until they were at an end, as they 'conceive it unfair to detail any remarks while they are pending'.[29] This, they hoped, would 'satisfy a volume already received on the subject, and may save trouble to those who shall thereafter send them'.[30] Unsurprisingly, however, government and loyalist writers were equally guilty of meddling in the trials in their attempts to prejudge the defendants in their newspaper

25 'Mr. O'Leary's Narrative', *Morning Post* (16 August 1791), [1].
26 Butler, p. 170; John Barrell, *Imagining the King's Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793–1796* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 307.
27 Barrell, p. 307.
28 'Cursory Strictures', *Morning Chronicle* (28 October 1794), [3].
29 'To Our Correspondents', *Times* (25 November 1794), [2].
30 Ibid.

and pamphlet writings. For our purposes, the most significant fact is that Godwin obviously wished to influence the outcome of the trials, and not least by choosing to do so through the medium of the newspaper press. The prospect of speedy publication drew him and many other writers to the newspaper medium.

However, it was just that: a *prospect*. In practice, it could take months for the editors to find room for letters. In some cases, letters were delayed for so long that editors struggled to keep track of them, and writers risked losing their manuscripts for good. One correspondent was informed that his text had 'been mislaid, or it should be returned according to the Writer's directions', while another was told that his text would appear at the first opportunity and that the editors were 'sorry that the former copy of them was mislaid'.[31] An editorial note in the *Gazetteer* suggests the frustration felt by both contributors and editors when manuscripts disappeared:

> Mr. F. Bovy's letter has really been often sought for, and will be sent to him as soon as it can be found. He should have given notice, at first, that he wished to receive it again, if not inserted.[32]

Judging from the many editorial notes of rejection in this period, however, this risk does not seem to have deterred writers from sending their manuscripts to the newspapers. Indeed, many writers were not only anxious to get their texts published as soon as possible; they sometimes seemed confident that this would happen. One writer who signed his letters 'Candour', and who had already received much publicity in the *Morning Chronicle* in November and December 1791, took it for granted that this would continue when closing one of his letters to the editors with 'P.S. — In your Paper of to-morrow, I answer the Sixth Letter of *Common Sense*'.[33] However, the letter did not appear the following day, or the day after that. Indeed, his next letter was not published until 20 December, thirteen days later than he expected.[34] After this experience, Candour was less sure of publicity, commenting that he hoped the editors would 'be so good as to insert [his next letter] speedily'.[35] Importantly, the letter that finally did appear was not the one he had intended to have printed, because while he waited for the publication of that letter, his opponent managed to publish two letters of his own. Since Candour's letter of 20 December responds to arguments presented in these two letters, he clearly felt the need to answer these instead of going ahead with the letter he had intended to have published.

This demonstrates the impact editorial decisions had upon unfolding debates of the period. As 'gatekeepers' of important public platforms, newspaper managers influenced the setting of agendas for the discussion of current affairs.[36] In modern communication studies, the gatekeeping metaphor is used mostly in relation to news, rather than commentary, as a way to explore which stories receive press coverage and which stories are left entirely out of the picture. However, the term may also be fruitfully employed with regard to the way editors act as the gatekeepers of public responses to these news stories. By publishing or rejecting commentary in the form of letters to the editor, editors had a formative impact on the development of public debate in response

31 'To Correspondents', *Times* (18 July 1791), [2]; 'To Correspondents', *Times* (7 December 1791), [2].
32 'To Correspondents', *Gazetteer* (28 November 1791), [2].
33 Candour, 'Insurrection in the West Indies — To the Editor of the Morning Chronicle', *Morning Chronicle* (7 December 1791), [4].
34 Candour, 'For the Morning Chronicle — To Common Sense', *Morning Chronicle* (20 December 1791), [4].
35 Ibid.
36 Pamela J. Shoemaker and Tim P. Vos, *Gatekeeping Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

to the news. In a decade with so many ground-breaking socio-political changes, it was important to voice opinions as quickly as possible, in the hopes that they might shape the public perception of events. If editors were able and willing to find room for political commentary straight away, newspapers could lend themselves well to this purpose. Jeremy Popkin has argued that, whereas the pamphlet was 'quickly outdistanced by the movement of events', the newspaper 'could react, adjust its position, or shift its attention to new issues'.[37]

However, although the example of Candour supports this observation, we should not overemphasize the high speed of producing a newspaper vis-à-vis a pamphlet. When Godwin published his 'Cursory Strictures' in the *Morning Chronicle* on 21 October 1794, speed was indeed of the essence, but an accompanying editorial note reveals that the strictures were already 'in the press, and will be published in the form of a pamphlet to-morrow noon'.[38] Admittedly, another note shows that Godwin had intended his text to appear in the newspaper one day sooner, but due to a lack of space, it had been 'unavoidably postponed' to the next day.[39] Nevertheless, even if his letter had appeared on 20 October, it would only have anticipated the pamphlet by two days, but these two days probably mattered greatly to Godwin. When the London radicals were accused of High Treason, he rushed home from a visit to a friend in Warwickshire, and 'locked himself up' from 17 to 18 October in order to compose the 'Cursory Strictures'.[40] Time was surely of the essence in this case, but on other occasions authors might have been willing to wait a few days. Here we see that speed could hardly have been the only reason why writers wished to publish their texts in the daily newspaper press.

Reaching a Wide Audience

Indeed, speed may have been less important than reaching a relatively wide and diverse audience. But what exactly were the real or imagined newspaper audiences of the period? Did newspaper proprietors cater to specific groups of readers, or did they seek to reach a larger and more heterogeneous audience? Did consumers read a wide range of newspapers, or did they, on the contrary, seek out particular papers, whilst avoiding others?

The French journalist Pierre-Louis Roederer commented in 1796 that serialized publications that appeared on a regular basis would reach more readers 'every day, at the same moment [...]; being the almost indispensable basis for each day's conversation, not only do they affect a larger body of people, but their impact is stronger than that of any other type of printed matter'.[41] Although this is anecdotal evidence, expressed by a journalist with self-interested motives for promoting periodical publications, it nevertheless suggests that the value of the newspaper, in contrast to books and pamphlets,

37 Jeremy Popkin, *News and Politics in the Age of Revolution: Jean Luzac's* Gazette De Leyde (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 66.

38 'These Strictures', *Morning Chronicle* (21 October 1794), [3]. The pamphlet was published by George Kearsley, and later by Daniel Isaac Eaton. Butler, p. 169.

39 'Cursory Strictures', *Morning Chronicle* (20 October 1794), [2].

40 Albert Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty: The English Democratic Movement in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 341.

41 Quoted in Popkin, p. 66.

rested largely on its ability to regularly reach a wide audience. Many newspaper historians share this point of view.[42]

The fact that many writers sought to publish their letters in more than one paper supports the idea that reaching a wide audience was what particularly attracted them to the newspaper medium. The aforementioned correspondence between 'Candour' and his antagonist 'Common Sense' printed in the *Morning Chronicle* during the autumn of 1791 serves as an example. The letters furiously debated who was responsible for the outbreak of the Saint-Domingue slave rebellion. They are particularly interesting because of the details surrounding their publication. Although the majority appeared within the same newspaper, the *Morning Chronicle* was not initially the sole outlet. Indeed, Common Sense's first letter appeared in the *Star* on 18 November, the evening before it was published in the *Chronicle*. In other words, either Perry and Gray must have copied the letter from the *Star*, or the author sent it to both papers. The second possibility seems more likely, considering that the next couple of letters appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* prior to the *Star*, making it impossible for the former to have copied the latter.

Similarly, the *Morning Chronicle* was not the only outlet for Candour's letters, at least not from the outset. An editorial note in the *Oracle* announced that they had received the first letter 'in *Answer to* Common Sense', which they were '*unavoidably obliged to defer till To-morrow*'.[43] In the ensuing days, Perry and Gray consistently published the letters one day after they appeared in the *Oracle*, suggesting that they purloined them from their rival. However, the first letter was published in the *Morning Chronicle* on 26 November, which was presumably the same morning that the letter appeared in the *Oracle*.[44] Thus, Perry and Gray would not have had time to copy it. Again, this supports the idea that the author sent his letters to more than one paper.

It appears that Candour eventually stopped sending his letters to the *Oracle*, or perhaps the editor, John Bell, refused to publish them, because there are no signs of his letters after 8 December. It must be noted, however, that the coverage of the *Oracle* in the Burney Collection is patchy in this period. The letters continued to appear in the *Morning Chronicle*, however. On 5 December, Common Sense addressed his opponent, stating: 'As you express a flattering wish, Sir, to recommend yourself to my attention, I presume you will not dislike my addressing you rather than your editors.'[45] Common Sense may have had Perry and Gray in mind when referring to editors in the plural, but this may also have been a reference to the fact that Candour's letters appeared in two different newspapers. Later, on 21 December, Candour referred to 'our common editor', and because Common Sense's letters never appeared in the *Oracle*, Candour now seemed to be addressing his letters exclusively to the *Morning Chronicle*. It is difficult to establish whether Candour preferred the *Oracle* or the *Morning Chronicle*, and whether Common Sense preferred the *Morning Chronicle* or the *Star*; whether one paper was perceived to be a more advantageous outlet than the others, or whether it was irrelevant to them in which paper their texts appeared. The example nevertheless

42 Popkin, p. 66; Stanley Morison, *The History of the Times, Vol. 1: 'The Thunderer' in the Making, 1785–1841* (London: The Times Publishing Company, 1935), p. 21; Christine Ferdinand, *Benjamin Collins and the Provincial Newspaper Trade in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 178; Will Slauter, 'The Rise of the Newspaper', in *Making News: The Political Economy of Journalism in Britain and America from the Glorious Revolution to the Internet*, ed. by Richard R. John and Jonathan Silberstein-Loeb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 19–46 (p. 20).

43 'To Correspondents', *Oracle* (25 November 1791), [2].

44 The editorial note in the *Oracle* promised to publish the letter on 26 November, but as the issue for 26 November is missing from the Burney Collection, I have been unable to confirm whether the letter actually appeared that day.

45 Common Sense, 'Insurrection in St. Domingo — No. 1 — To Candour', *Morning Chronicle* (5 December 1791), [4].

sheds important light on some of the choices facing commentators wishing to spread a political message and suggests that reaching a wide audience may have been an important motivation for sending such letters to the daily newspapers.

However, newspaper audiences may have been more limited and homogenous than indicated by the previous discussion. Let us suppose that readers were loyal to newspapers that embodied their own political dispositions, without seeking out those with opposing views, and that newspaper proprietors, having a clear sense of who their readers were, published letters that reinforced, rather than challenged, their evaluation of public affairs. Surely, this must pose a serious restriction on the newspapers' ability to contribute to public debate in any true sense of the word?

Although one could easily imagine that proprietors were anxious to please their customers, they needed to appeal to a wide variety of readers in order to attract advertising customers. And even if there existed selective readers who were only interested in reading newspapers that confirmed their own political opinions, it seems improbable that most people who were interested in public affairs would limit themselves in this way. *Some* may have preferred echo chambers, reading only the newspapers they agreed with, but during the political upheavals of the 1790s, many must surely have read a wider selection. Despite probably favouring certain papers over others on account of their political sympathies, readers would need to seek a greater variety in order to keep up-to-date on the latest news. Pro-governmental newspapers generally provided greater access to news through their political connections, which meant that those who favoured Opposition politics needed to read them in order to access the latest reports. Conversely, innovations made by Opposition papers of the period — probably largely due to their comparative disadvantage vis-à-vis the ministerial papers — must have attracted conservative readers who supported the Pitt Ministry.[46]

Moreover, readers may have sought out a large variety of papers not only in order to get the latest reports, but also out of a desire to monitor public commentary.[47] For instance, although the previously mentioned Philo-Detector was fiercely anti-revolutionary and anti-abolitionist, he revealed that he read newspapers that contrasted starkly with his own political views. Claiming that those sympathetic to the Revolution had taken great pains 'to exaggerate the unpleasant situation of the lower ranks of men in this Island', and to represent 'the soldiers, the sailors*, or the poor of this country' as oppressed, Philo-Detector added an asterisk and a footnote explaining that he had read in 'the Argus of this day [...] that a select party of seamen met in the most secret manner at a Public-house in Wapping, to consult on some means of gaining redress of their intolerable grievances'.[48] The *Argus* was by far the most radical paper of the period; it is thus significant that someone as conservative as Philo-Detector would read it.

Regardless of actual reading habits of the period, writers and editors both seem to have expected readers to follow more than one paper. Editors wanted to make sure that readers would be able to follow the logic of unfolding debates. In February 1792, William Woodfall of the *Diary* received a series of three letters, but as the first of these had been 'unaccountably mislaid by the Compositor', the author was asked to

46 For some examples of such innovations, see Johanne Kristiansen, 'Foreign News Reporting in Transition: James Perry and the French Constitution Ceremony', in *Travelling Chronicles: News and Newspapers from the Early Modern Period to the Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Siv Gøril Brandtzæg, Paul Goring, and Christine Watson (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), pp. 181–202.

47 Jeremy Popkin, *Revolutionary News: The Press in France, 1789–1799* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), pp. 89–90.

48 Philo-Detector, 'To the Editor of the Morning Chronicle. Letter 1', *Morning Chronicle* (12 March 1792), [4].

'furnish us with a fresh copy, as we cannot, with any use to his argument, give place to his Letters dated the 10th and 11th instant, without having first handed to the publick the antecedent link in his chain of reasoning'.[49] In this case, it would be impossible for readers to follow the logic of the writer because the first letter had not been published at all. However, what if it had been published in another newspaper, or what if writers sought to publish responses in papers other than the one in which the original letter had appeared? In other words, would readers be able to follow debates transcending individual newspaper titles?

There is evidence to suggest that readers had to read more than one paper if they wished to make sense of the political commentary appearing in them. Indeed, much of the published material would be unintelligible unless readers had access to several newspapers. One reason for this was that writers would often try to publish their texts in other titles when rejected by their preferred outlets. An anonymous writer in the *Times*, for instance, complained that he had tried to publish an article in the *Star*, but as the article had been rejected, he requested the *Times* to publish it in that paper instead.[50] He thus seemed to expect that readers would be able to follow his logic regardless of the paper in which his letters appeared. On another occasion, the *Star* refused to publish an 'Article referring to one which appeared in another Print'.[51] In other words, writers not only tried to publish in alternative papers when rejected by their preferred outlets, but also responded to letters appearing in one publication by sending answers to another. My exploration of the newspapers in this period clearly demonstrates that this was a highly common practice, and that letters were often directly provoked by texts that had been published in other titles.[52]

Perhaps the best example of the complex practices demanded of readers in this period was a letter controversy regarding Warren Hastings's mismanagement as governor-general of Bengal. A writer in the *Morning Chronicle*, signing his letters 'J. S.', wrote in defence of Hastings.[53] According to J. S., three pamphlets had been recently published on this subject, 'all written by avowed friends to Government, and all equally calculated to deceive and mislead'.[54] He now took the opportunity to refute these publications, through a letter in the *Morning Chronicle*. Five days later, an editorial note appeared explaining that J. S. had 'read the Remarks that were published in three Papers yesterday, upon his Letter in Monday's Chronicle', and that he assured 'the Writers of these Remarks, that he shall have a full, and he hopes, a satisfactory reply on Monday'.[55] In other words, the respondents had not sent their letters to the *Morning Chronicle*; they seemed to expect that they would reach their intended audience nonetheless. Due to the patchy coverage of newspapers in the Burney Collection for this period, I was able to identify only one of these three newspapers, namely the *Times*, which published an unsigned letter in response to J. S. on 17 February.

As promised, J. S. replied to these letters in the *Morning Chronicle* on Monday 20 February and followed up with another on 23 February. In these rather lengthy letters,

49 'To Our Correspondents', *Diary* (20 February 1792), [2].

50 'To the Editor of The Times', *Times* (22 August 1792), [3].

51 'To Correspondents', *Star* (9 March 1792), [3].

52 See, for instance, Detector, 'To the Party-Writer', *World* (30 July, 1791), [2]; Verax, 'For the Morning Chronicle', *Morning Chronicle* (5 September 1791), [2]; S[amuel?] Parr, 'To the Editor of the Morning Chronicle', *Morning Chronicle* (26 December 1791), [3]; L.W.A.S., 'To the Printer of the Diary', *Diary* (29 February 1792), [2]; and Academicus, 'To the Editor of the Morning Chronicle', *Morning Chronicle* (16 April 1792), [3].

53 J. S., 'To the Editor of the Morning Chronicle', *Morning Chronicle* (13 February 1792), [4]. The signature may lead us to suspect that the writer was Hastings's agent, Major John Scott. At least one of his antagonists thought so. See 'For The Times', *Times* (27 February 1792), [3].

54 J. S., 'To the Editor of the Morning Chronicle', *Morning Chronicle* (13 February 1792), [4].

55 'London: Saturday, February 18', *Morning Chronicle* (18 February 1792), [4].

he rejected arguments presented in pamphlets and letters alike, making no distinction between them. An anonymous author — presumably the same person whose letter appeared in the *Times* on 17 February — responded in the *Times* on 27 February, claiming that J. S. had not 'controverted a single position advanced' in his first letter.[56] J. S. refers several times to this writer as 'Mr. Anderson', obviously believing that the unsigned letters originated with George Anderson, who was the author of one of the pamphlets sparking this controversy.[57] After this letter, however, there was silence on the matter for almost an entire month, until 20 March, when a letter from J. S. suddenly appeared in the *Morning Chronicle*. Three days later, the anonymous writer in the *Times* expressed surprise 'after so long a silence' to see 'in a Morning Paper of Tuesday, a kind of answer from J. S. to the remarks on India Affairs, which were inserted in your Paper last month'.[58] In fact, J. S.'s letter was dated as early as 7 March, but Perry and Gray were not able to accommodate him sooner due to the long reports of parliamentary debates in this period, which would sometimes crowd even the front page to the exclusion of advertisements.[59]

Within the framework of this article, the letter controversy over East-India affairs is not important in itself. However, while it is impossible to reconstruct collective reading practices in the late eighteenth century based on individual examples, this episode indicates an interesting and, perhaps, not unusual dynamic. One commentator, upon reading three pamphlets on a topic of great public interest, set out to refute their arguments by sending letters to a chosen newspaper. This provoked supporters of the other side to publish their own letters in other newspapers. Despite the appearance of their writings in different titles, and, indeed, across different print genres, the authors were perfectly capable of following each other's arguments, and they seemed to expect readers to be equally able to, or else there would be no point in writing and publishing these letters at all. The fact that responses were not only published in the newspaper where the opposing letter appeared, but also in rival papers — often with conflicting political inclinations — suggests that the authors themselves accessed more than one title. Significantly, it also implies that both writers and editors expected readers to be able to follow debates that transcended individual titles, indicating that newspaper consumers constituted a much wider and more heterogeneous group than some scholars have suggested.[60]

Conclusion

This article set out to explore the comparative advantages of the serialized English newspaper versus the stand-alone political pamphlet for writers wishing to partake in discussions of public affairs towards the end of the eighteenth century. Despite the enduring notion of the 'pamphlet war', scholars have argued that the newspaper over the course of the late eighteenth century came to replace the political pamphlet as the

56 'For The Times', *Times* (27 February 1792), [3].

57 George Anderson, *A General View of the Variations Which Have Been Made in the Affairs of the East-India Company, From the Conclusion of the War, in India, in 1784, to the Commencement of the Present Hostilities* (London: J. Stockdale, 1792).

58 'For The Times', *Times* (23 March 1792), [3].

59 See, for instance, *Morning Chronicle* (1, 2, and 14 March 1792).

60 See, for instance, Simon Varey, 'The Craftsman', *Prose Studies*, 16 (1993), 58–77 (p. 61); Karl Schweizer and Rebecca Klein, 'The French Revolution and Developments in the London Daily Press to 1793', *Publishing History* 18 (1985), 85–97 (p. 91); Ann C. Dean, 'Insinuation and Instruction: Public Opinion in Eighteenth-Century "Letters to the Printer"', in *Print and Power in France and England, 1500–1800*, ed. by David Adams and Adrian Armstrong (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 93–106; Ann C. Dean, 'Court Culture and Political News in London's Eighteenth-Century Newspapers', *ELH*, 73 (2006), 631–49.

dominant platform for political debate. However, few studies exist to throw light on possible reasons for this significant shift.

This article is an attempt to fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge about this important topic. A meticulous close reading of evidence compiled from digital newspaper archives suggests that the late eighteenth-century 'letter to the editor' provided writers with a significant platform for political discussion during the heated Revolution Debates of the 1790s. Despite some drawbacks of the newspaper medium in terms of its haste of production and material transience, writers were drawn to this form, perhaps especially because it could offer, at least in theory, prompt publication and an easy way to reach a relatively large and diverse audience. The newspaper thus gradually came to supplant the non-serialized pamphlet as the dominant medium for public debate.

This is not to say that pamphlets lost their appeal overnight. They continued alongside newspaper letters as significant platforms for public debate throughout the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, they have been allowed to dominate scholarly discussions of eighteenth-century political debate almost to the complete exclusion of many important newspaper texts that were published on a daily basis – texts that may have informed or influenced many of the ideas presented in the pamphlets themselves. In other words, the pamphlets were *secondary*; they were the results of deliberations over time, when authors had the opportunity to develop their arguments more fully and publish them in a more lasting format. They are the types of literary production that survive the test of time and are handed down to posterity.

Contrary to this, letters to newspaper editors are *primary*; whilst certainly less focused and written in haste, they were nevertheless immediate responses to recent critical issues. They were the initial seeds of arguments that, if their authors were fortunate enough to find an outlet in one of the leading newspapers, reached readers, who would either nod their heads in earnest approval or mumble angrily under their breaths in protest. These texts are ephemeral, but they inspired heated exchanges of opinion in their own time and had a formative impact on ideas that were later presented in more lasting and eloquent forms in the pamphlets and books of the period.

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