

MASS MEDIA AND SOCIETY

History: Colonial Press

Earliest newspapers

The earliest known newspapers came about 150 years after Gutenberg invented the moveable type printing press. Museums hold a 1609 German newspaper, a 1621 London newspaper and a 1631 Paris newspaper.

It wasn't until the 1690s that newspapers made the scene in the American colonies . . . and newspapers were anything but mass media at the time.

Reading and writing were still mostly reserved for the elite in society and the cost of newspapers was beyond the reach of most who barely scraped by for a living.

As we take a look at the history of newspapers in this country we're going to look at them by eras. The lectures will vary a bit from the eras defined in the text, which only accentuates that history is interpretive.

Eras we'll be covering in lectures include:

- Colonial Press (1690s)
- Press and the New Republic (1760s)
- Penny Press (1830s)
- "New" Journalism Yellow Journalism People's Champions
- Socially Responsible Press (1890s)
- Modern Journalism 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s

After that we'll go back and look at the changes in the press from another point of view: war. We'll look at key aspects of the press in relation to the following wars or military actions:

- Civil War
- World War I
- World War II
- Korean War
- Vietnam War
- Grenada Conflict
- Gulf War

Because history can be boring to some, I've broken up the lectures into small chunks, one of each era.

Colonial Press (1690s)

Historians like to peg the exact beginning and end of historical events, though the exercise is often less important than the general information. One such exercise is to determine the first newspaper in the American colonies.

Clearly the first known American paper to be published was Benjamin Harris' Publick Occurrences on Sept. 29, 1690. The masthead included the words: Vol. 1, Issue 1. However, Harris' effort was not appreciated by the British governor in Massachusetts and there never was an Issue 2. So, does it qualify as a newspaper?

The first paper to be published on a continuing basis was almost fourteen years later in the form of John Campbell published the first Boston News-Letter newspaper.

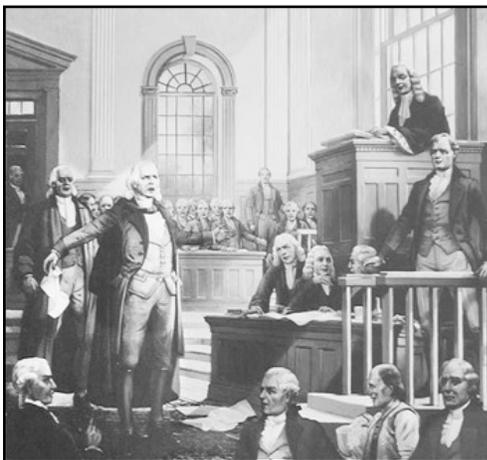
Early newspaper publishers often were postmasters, who saw European newspapers come their hands. They lifted news from those papers and reprinted it in their own papers, which mostly contained shipping or maritime news, philosophical essays, bad poetry and, yes, advertising. Even the early European newspapers contained advertising. The layout design of the newspapers was very dull: no headlines and scarcely a division between one story and another.



Published With Approval

As Harris found out, the British governors that ruled the colonies would not put up with too much dissent from newspapers. The early newspapers pretty much looked for approval from these governors before publishing. Not all did, however.

Perhaps one of the most famous examples of dissent was John Peter Zenger, who in 1735 ran afoul with the New York governor, William Cosby. Zenger was jailed and charged with



sedition and libel. He wasn't tried in a court of law for nine months, but his paper continued to publish as his wife took over the publishing duties.

When Zenger finally got his day in court his lawyer argued that the charges against Zenger should be dropped because what he printed when he criticized Cosby was the truth. But the libel law of the day only required Cosby to prove that the content hurt his reputation and that Zenger was responsible for publishing it: two things Zenger did not deny. The argument that truth should be a defense to libel later became an important part of libel law, as we'll learn in the next section of this course.

Reading Assignment

You should be reading the chapter on newspapers in your textbook to get more information about newspaper history.

Exercise

Describe some of the characteristics of early colonial newspapers.

Note that when submitting the answer start the subject line with:

J100x - YourLastName - Colonial

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