The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe

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News, history and the construction of the present in early modern England

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In Before Novels, his important cultural history of the late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century literary milieu, J. Paul Hunter suggests that when the novel began to emerge in the early eighteenth century, it did so amid 'a developing concern for contemporaneity, a wish to recognize the momentous in the momentary and to feel the power of all time in its most fleeting moment.' England had developed, he continues, 'an urgent sense of now' and a preoccupation with novelty; but, he concedes, 'it is hard to say exactly when the present time became such an urgent issue in the English cultural consciousness.' Hunter is undoubtedly correct both as to the existence of this phenomenon of present-mindedness, and its clearest expression in the journalism of the Augustan era. His account raises a number of problems, not least (as he admits in the latter quotation) the beginnings of a strong sense of the present, and that present's connections to the past. In noting, for instance, the obvious etymological link between the French word jour and journalist (a word that did not itself appear until the early nineteenth century), he suggests that by the 1690s, English culture had become so intoxicated by 'the potential significance to human consciousness of any single moment that an immediate written record was required.' This correctly and astutely identifies the relationship, but puts the cart before the horse. The newspaper was not merely the creation of a cultural obsession; it in large measure created that obsession, which cannot have sprung ex nihilo. To make this point, it is necessary to go back beyond the 1690s and link the Augustans' concern with contemporaneity to the creation of that contemporaneity over the preceding century.

The perception of the present

The modern sense of the present as a segment of time experientially distinguishable from past or future differs sharply from that which existed in the mid-sixteenth century. This is owed in large measure to the progressive shrinkage that has occurred over four centuries in the length of time deemed minimally necessary for a series of events to unfold, to be fashioned into formal or informal narrative (or even into competing and mutually contradictory narratives), and dispersed over a wide geographic field. The indulgence of a recent example may serve to illustrate how presentness is manufactured in our own time, by way of contrast with the pre-electronic era. In January 1986, as I left my home for the university to teach an afternoon class, I saw on the television the first report of the Challenger space shuttle disaster. This had been flashed only moments earlier from Cape Canaveral, Florida nearly two thousand miles to the south. Within thirty minutes, the time it took me to walk to campus and get into the classroom, the entire university, including my students (not normally the group of people most conscious of events outside their scholastic and recreational universe), was abuzz with talk of the catastrophe. When I flew to England for the mid-term break three weeks later, the shuttle was still the main subject of conversation, dwarfing Mrs Thatcher's latest attacks on the unions and the impending fall of Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos. What was already a 'past' event, existentially, was still talked of, understood, and treated as part of an extended present. Having lost none of its shocking immediacy over the preceding weeks, it was still 'news,' and not yet 'history.' News of some kind—oral or written communication of some new event, some fluctuation in the 'normal' process of things—is of course as old as civilization. There has always been an interest in new events, something to enliven the boredom of daily life, and bad news often has the added appeal to schadenfreude. News stands on the cusp between past and future; it arouses recollection, anticipation, expectation, or apprehension. But the means by which it has been communicated, and consequently the ways in which it has been perceived, have evolved over the millennia, in response to developments in transportation and technology. Our perception of news is very different from that of early modern people, because both our technology and our relationship to that technology is radically different; theirs, in turn, differed from that of the pre-print era. Stephen Kern's panoramic study of European culture in the pre-First World War era, as it made use of new instruments of communication such as the telephone and Marconi wireless, points to the simultaneity of experience as a critical mark of a culture's tacit recognition of a public present in which a wide range of experience can be shared by many people over wide distances. Commentators on the wireless news reports of the Titanic's last hours in April 1912 noted 'with a sense near to awe that we have been almost witness of a great ship in her death agonies.' The process that Kern notes has been magnified by technology in the course of the century, but its antecedents can be pushed back to the seventeenth century. Because major events now reach a wide audience through the print and, especially quickly, the electronic media, they can almost instantaneously form a common currency in local, national and international discourse—a 'public sphere,' to borrow Jürgen Habermas' terminology—that they could not have been done as easily two centuries ago, and scarcely at all three centuries before that. And because they do reach listeners or readers so quickly, they are now deemed 'current events,' rather than history, at the point at which they are perceived, cognitively processed, and discussed. As one student of the psychology of memory and time has put it, 'the psychological present is a duration, not an
instant. Since this would appear directly to contradict the formal, philosophical understanding of the present as a brief moment among most commentators since St. Augustine, some explanation is needed of the shift toward an experientially-defined sense of the present as meaningful duration. In the West, at least, we now have a very strong sense of the present (and hence of immediate past flowing into but distinct from that present) because our lives, and the society that shapes them, have themselves been pre-narrated by the public institutions that organize and convey information. As Pierre Janet, a pioneer in the study of the psychology of memory, noted in 1928 by way of studying the phenomenon of *déjà vu*, the sense of duration is largely intellectual, its preciseness impeded by our construction of the present. In other words, our present is as much a social fabrication as our past, but it is seen as independent of that past, even if it draws on that past through memory, and even if we acknowledge that it will, in the future, become past, and hence a matter of history.

People of all classes in the Middle Ages and in the sixteenth century inhabited a remembered past (enhanced for the then-relatively small number of literate by reading) and an expected future. In contrast to us, they conceived of the present as an instant rather than a duration, through most of the period recognizing no 'present' beyond that instant. This lack of a sense of present as duration was owed less to intellectual theories about the nature of time than to the reality of its experience, and in particular to the limitations constraining the perception of news. These limitations will figure prominently in the argument I wish to make about precisely how the printing press affected news. They can be enumerated as follows:

1. speed: the slow rate at which people learned of remote events, a velocity that increased in inverse proportion to their geographical distance from the event itself;
2. flow: the discreet, blip-like and erratic way in which news reached them and had then to be sorted out from rumour;
3. commonality: the degree to which knowledge of a particular event is shared simultaneously among persons or communities separated by geography; and
4. density: the number of aural and visual cues to sudden change, most obviously represented in the printed media and in the public world of conversation, but most often in combination of these.

Our own experience of these limits is not monolithic, but conditioned by race, class, gender, family, occupation and other factors. On the whole, however, it is very different from that of our ancestors of four centuries or so ago. We do not learn of news in the way they did, which was normally slowly, sporadically and sparsely, unless they were directly caught up in the events by proximity. Rather, we are enveloped by it, and the plots of our own lives are absorbed into an ongoing social narrative (the medium-term 'march of events,' or 'today's big story') — whether we choose to take an interest in them or not. It is in the seventeenth century, however, that the social and psychological experience of news first acquired something like its modern form, with the only major changes still to come falling under category 1 (speed), as communication became virtually instantaneous beginning with the telegraph.

Modern technology has increased our awareness of news but perhaps also deadened our sensitivity to it, as theorists of boredom such as Klapp suggest, so that we now need a major event like Kennedy's assassination or the Princess of Wales' death to jolt us into engagement with a present beyond our domestic and professional lives. Nevertheless, it is possible to trace the origins of the communications trajectory that has ended in the present back to the last great revolution in communications, the printing press. How printing affected the perception of news is less obvious than it might seem: any advances in the velocity of news transmission prior to that time were very modest, and approaches that emphasize the 'speed' of the print era are emphasizing an attribute that the press did not in fact possess. In terms of the four constraints on news mentioned above, the press did not materially increase the speed at which news travelled (it was still sometimes slower than a fast horseman). However, it did expand the number of people simultaneously reading or discussing variant versions of the same news (commonality); it presented multiple — even if conflicting — reports of those events (density); and it eventually regularized the rate at which events were transmitted and the intervals between transmissions (flow).

### Time and the speed of news

From the point of view of a person receiving news of a great event, and recording it or passing it on to an acquaintance, there was an unbridgeable temporal gap between the event itself and his or her perception of it. This is a gap which contemporaries did not often remark on, since they were accustomed to it, but it made their understanding of what was present and what was past fundamentally different from our own. At the end of the seventeenth century something like a modern understanding of temporal relations had been achieved, so much so that: Richard Steele made it the subject of a satire on the verb tenses, cast in the form of a mock letter from a Civil War prisoner who is about to be executed by Roundhead captors. In a final letter to his wife, the captive Royalist reports his death as past rather than impending, since he knows she will not receive this news until his head has fallen; this produces farcical complications since she weds again soon after receiving the letter, unaware that her husband had in the meantime been rescued.

It was literally impossible before the advent of the telegraph for an event to be noted at great distance almost immediately, in what is now colloquially termed 'real time,' after its occurrence. In addition, the period before 1641 (the year Crown restrictions on publication effectively ceased, or were at least considerably loosened) also lacked the enhanced density and flow of news conducive to the experience of 'current events,' except once again for those situated in close proximity to those events. To individuals who believed that the present was only an existential instant, an ephemeral joint between a dead past
and an unborn future, a delay of several days or more meant simply that the
even: they had heard about already belonged to the past: a recent past, perhaps, but
past none the less. The principal difference, then, between the period before
1640 and that after was not the greater speed of printed news, nor a noticeable
change in overall reception times (the time elapsed between an event and a
person's learning about it, by whatever means, at a distance). Rather, the sense
of an enveloping present owed its development to changes in the other limits on
news reception that I sketched out above: flow, density, and commonality. All of
these substantially altered during the seventeenth century, and particularly in
periods of continuous activity, publicized through multiple media (printed, oral
and written) such as the 1640s. It is this, not print's superiority over oral or
manuscript transmission, that accounts for the changing relationship between
past and present, and the establishment of the latter as a free-standing locus of
social experience. These changes had profound implications for the moderniza-
tion of the sense of time, and for the development of new media such as the
diary, whose capacity to record rapid change on an annual basis seemed by the mid-seventeenth century as inadequately slow as daily news now seems to users of Internet news servers and CNN.12

By way of illustrating the dispersal of a major news event and the importance
of geography, let us look at one well-known example, the announcement to the
world of the death of Elizabeth I. The old queen died at about three in the
morning on the last day (as it was reckoned then) of 1602, 24 March, which was
a Thursday. According to the young barrister John Manningham (whose
friendship with the late queen's chaplain, Dr Parry, gave him inside knowledge),
the Council had met at Whitehall and by ten o'clock, had proclaimed James VI
of Scotland as the new king of England. Sir Robert Cecil read this proclamation
aloud outside Whitehall; he then journeyed to Cheapside to read it there. Two
districts of the city thus heard of this major event separately but immediately,
and without any interposing media commentary, from the same high official.
Over the course of the day, most of London discovered the death of the queen,
though reports were fragmentary and coloured by rumour. Would there be a civil
war over the succession? Had the queen, already the subject of numerous plots,
finally been assassinated by Jesuits? Would the new king of Spain attempt
another invasion — or had Spanish troops indeed already landed in the south?
Those who could read would, some days and even weeks later, have the
opportunity to discover answers to some of these questions as proclamations
were issued by the Council, and as city hacks wrote poems and processional
about the queen in anticipation of her funeral, or of her successor's arrival.
So much for the city. Because London, and especially the royal court, served
as a kind of clearing-house for news from all points of the kingdom and beyond,
the closer one was to the metropolis the sooner one was likely to hear of most
events.13 For the rest of the nation had to wait much longer to discover this news, as
did the expectant heir, several hundred miles to the north, despite the hurried
departure of Sir Robert Carey and his famous breakneck ride (at about seven
miles an hour) across country to Edinburgh. Carey reached Doncaster, 162 miles
away, that night, and Berwick (184 miles) on Saturday; he then 'poasted on to
Edinburgh' (fifty miles), after stopping to refresh himself, change horses, and
acquaint his brother, Sir John, with the news. He got to Edinburgh later that
night, having covered about 400 miles in three days. Consequently, lowland
Scotland, or at least Edinburgh, may have learned of the change of dynasty
before some parts of England. It took considerably longer for the news to travel
to rebellion-torn Ireland; the Earl of Tyrone, his armies worn out and his
supplies exhausted, surrendered to the late queen on 3 April, still in ignorance of
her death.14

News travelled as quickly or slowly as the men or women who carried it in the
early modern era, which is to say that it did not normally travel quickly at all.
Fernand Braudel estimated that until the major road improvements of the mid-
eighteenth century, the average speed of all types of transport was a maximum
of 100 kilometres (sixty miles) per twenty-four hour day.15 This may be overly
pessimistic (depending on the terrain), since an estimate derived from Kentish
postal speeds in the later part of the seventeenth century indicates that an
average journey could take place at no greater than four and a half miles per
hour, somewhat less during the winter — considerably slower than Carey's mad
gallop of 1603 but the general point stands.16 Between England and the
Continent, delays were longer, though perhaps one ought to be surprised that
they were not even greater. The news of Francis I's defeat at Pavia on 24
February 1525 first reached England in late March, in a letter of 15 March to
Cardinal Wolsey from the English ambassador to Madrid, who himself had
heard the news five days earlier from 'a currier, that passyd through France be [né]
the French kings salve conduct'.17 Sir Thomas Harrington complained to his
aged mother in 1632 that 'news comes so uncertainly and slowly to hand.' Sir
Thomas was able to relay to her the spectacular victory of Gustavus Adolphus
over the forces of Maximilian of Bavaria at Lech, which occurred on 5/15
April, only on 15 May, having just heard it in London; others had to wait for
newsbooks to report it over the course of the next week. Bad news may have
been fitter of foot: a year earlier, the burning of Magdeburg by Tilly's troops
on 10/20 May 1631 reached Oxford a mere three weeks later, on 30 May.18
From more remote areas, news took even longer: Samuel Pepys first learned from
his patron Edward Montagu of the death of Charles X of Sweden on 3 March,
1660, exactly a month after the king had died. Running in the other direction,
word of the battle of Worcester (3/13 September, 1651), which destroyed
Charles II's Scottish army and sent him into exile, reached Paris nine days later,
on the night of 12/22 September.19

Nor did the regular newspapers of the Restoration much improve the speed
of foreign news, since they could only print material as they received it by packet
boats from across the channel. Although more contact as well as back and forth travel between England and the colonies took place in the seventeenth century than has often been acknowledged, the ocean remained an even greater divide. Word of the dreadful earthquake in Lima, Peru (20 October 1687) took the whole winter to cross the Atlantic, appearing in the London Gazette only on 24 May 1688. On 20 September 1705 Nicholas Blundell in Lancashire heard, for the first time, of the death of his brother in Maryland nearly ten months earlier.

Provincial papers remained heavily dependent on the London press or on handwritten newsletters from the capital well into the eighteenth century. The same was true of news going in the opposite direction as information from the country was sent to city newsletter writers, and eventually newspapers, by post or rider; the principal difference between foreign and provincial news throughout the period was the considerably greater dependence of London news-writers on the foreign printed press for international news, supplemented by diplomatic dispatches and material supplied by newly-returned merchants, sailors and travellers. In contrast, news from other English and Welsh towns or even further afield in Scotland and Ireland could be sent by a system of regular correspondents.

Information and the flow of news

Like the sense of time itself, the ways in which news intruded on an individual's mental horizon could undoubtedly be shaped by such factors as social degree, gender, religion, or occupation. But the most influential determinant was without a doubt geography. Because towns, especially London, served as national or regional clearing-houses, those living in them were apt to think that there was an over-abundance of news, a chaos of passing events which had to be understood and mentally categorized, and which threatened to disturb the orderly passage of time. In a celebrated passage of his Anatomy of Melancholy, Robert Burton commented, from the perspective of an Oxford college room, on the variety of new information reaching his ears and eyes from different sources every day:

I hear new news every day, and those ordinary rumours of war, plagues, fires, inundations, thefts, murders, massacres, meteor, comets, spectrums, prodigies, apparitions, of towns taken, cities besieged in France, Germany, Turkey, Persia, Poland, &c. ... A vast confusion of vows, wishes, actions, edicts, petitions, lawsuits, pleas, laws, proclamations, complaints, grievances; are daily brought to our ears. New books every day, pamphlets, currantoes, stories, whole catalogues of volumes of all sorts, new paradoxes, opinions, schisms, heresies, controversies in philosophy, religion &c. ... To-day we hear of new Lords and officers created, to-morrow of some great men deposed, and then again of fresh honours conferred. ... Thus I daily hear, and such like, both private and publick newes.

So great was the flow of information that the news-conscious town-dweller was obliged to come to terms with the relative importance of an event, its national, international or local significance, or be overwhelmed by it. Burton's comments on this 'vast confusion' are a pungent reminder that the anxiety induced by too great a stream of information is merely the flip side of the feelings of boredom, melancholy or ennui which were first being articulated at the same time.

In the country, the case could be much different, though rural gentry and clergy, at least, were able to keep themselves informed of events elsewhere, especially during times of crisis. In the comparative isolation of her husband's Yorkshire estate, Lady Margaret Hoby appears to have heard from a visiting friend of the execution of her former brother-in-law, the earl of Essex, on 25 February 1601, within a day of the event. More trivial news, though coming a shorter distance, could take much longer. Through one Mr Pollard, the high constable of Pickering Lythe, Lady Hoby heard, a month after it happened, of the death from drunkenness of a York parson and 'some other things of lesse moment.' National events were received and noted together with those of familial or parochial interest. If they came in slowly and sporadically as they generally did, they did not much disrupt the gentle trickle of time through daily, weekly and yearly routines. The diary of an Essex minister, Ralph Josselin, may serve as an example of the way in which extraordinary news could be quietly noted, its occurrence meshing with facts of everyday life such as planting or the weather. On 24 February 1678, Josselin made the following entry:

Lovely growing weather, a million granted the King to begin the war with France (I) wee are a people peeled and polled, help lord, see the issue of things.

Josselin, an articulate and intelligent observer, was clearly aware of the significance of events taking place outside the tiny world of his Earls Colne home to a greater degree than would have been his humbler parishioners. This awareness would still have been somewhat limited and conditioned by geographical isolation, though in Essex Josselin was relatively close to the capital. Even in the mid-seventeenth century, when newsbooks had proliferated, news travelled slowly into the provinces, thereby making 'current events' that much less current. It is best not to overstate this distinction between centre and periphery: a shocking event was a shocking event, wherever one heard it, and recent studies of the circulation of political news and of the attitude of the 'county communities' suggest that they were considerably less narrow and localist in interest than was once believed. In his brief autobiography, John Evelyn recalled, as one of his Sussex childhood memories, being awakened abruptly one morning in 1628 with the news of the duke of Buckingham's assassination. One of the earliest memories of Abraham de la Pryme was of the death of Charles II in 1685; as a small boy in Yorkshire he had 'heard a gentleman say that came from London, that the city was in tears, and most of the towns through which he came.' For both men, these morsels of 'news,' unconnected blips on their
youthful horizons, occurred too early in their lives to shape their immediate futures, yet still occupied a privileged status in their retrospective understandings of their own pasts.

Density and commonality: Multiple modes of transmission of news

Thus far, I have argued that print affected the reproduction of news, and its effect on consciousness of present events, less by the speed at which it could record or disseminate events — which was still much slower, in the era of the hand-press, than writing or speech — than because of its mass-reproduction capacity, and the consequent rapidity with which it could replicate itself. This capacity was itself realized slowly, and until the late seventeenth century both the creators and receivers of news continued to rely heavily on more conventional media such as manuscript newsletters. Within England, visual and aural signals such as bells and bonfires (the latter set up in relay form) offered the easiest means to ‘flash’ news from one part of the country to another. Although they were unable to indicate exactly what that news was, some events (or rather, the outcomes of ongoing events) were already anticipated, so that the significance of a bonfire or bell-ringing would be understood in most places. This system remained in place half a century later: the proclamation of James II and the defeat of the duke of Monmouth were signalled at Leicester by a bonfire paid for by public money, as was the birth of the king’s son in 1688. A slower but more informative route was to rely on a network of correspondents for ‘retransmission’ of news across the country and on the Continent. In such a manner did the Protestant reformer Richard Hilles, living in Strasbourg in 1547, pass on to Heinrich Bullinger, in Zürich, the news of the death of Henry VIII and the coronation of his son, ‘which they write me word from England is all true.’ In the 1620s, the Cambridge scholar Joseph Mead subscribed to private newsletters as well as to the newer coranto which that decade produced; he in turn was a tireless recirculator of their contents to his own contacts.

News continued to be conveyed by oral transmission throughout and long past the end of the period under discussion here. During Elizabeth’s reign and through the early Stuart period, however, this was increasingly complemented by a variety of graphic forms including official and unofficial manuscript newsletters, libels, and ‘separates’, written or printed sheets sent from London to the provinces and giving details of foreign affairs, parliamentary speeches, and court scandals, as well as the regular diet of broadsheet ballad accounts of marvels and prodigies. Written and printed news reports were often sent together, a coranto joined to a personal newsletter, a practice that would continue after 1641. An important recent study by Alastair Bellany of the spread of news about the early Stuart court has exploited family muniments and especially diaries and commonplace books to demonstrate the breadth of circulation of oral, written and printed news concerning such scandalata magnata as the Thomas Overbury murder and the career and assassination of the duke of Buckingham. As Bellany perceptively remarks of the early seventeenth century: ‘A vibrant news culture created the space in which increasing numbers of people were able to engage with and become agents in the political process.’

Oral news lost no ground to its graphic counterparts after the collapse of Caroline censorship in 1641. If anything, its relationship with both print and manuscript became more symbiotic as each medium provided checks and confirmations on the others. The ballads published shortly after events such as the defeat of the Armada, the destruction of Charing Cross in 1647, the execution of the king, the Great Fire, and the Battle of Sedgemoor, which found their way into the collections of readers like Samuel Pepys, were successful in part because they could mediate between the oral and written. Other forms of printed news tended to complement rather than replace oral communication.

In Elizabethan and Jacobean London, one simply had to go to a central meeting place such as Lincoln’s Inn Fields, or ‘Paul’s Walk’ in the Cathedral environs, to hear the latest news. The Royal Exchange was ideal for this purpose. The diarist John Rous tried to obtain news of the king’s siege of Coventry in August 1642, he consulted both newspapers and Coventry men whom he encountered at Stourbridge Fair in Worcestershire. The Yorkshire cleric Abraham de la Pryme went to nearby Brigg to ‘heare the newse’ in 1696; since he also writes of going there to ‘see the newse,’ it is probable that, like Rous, he was picking it up from both newspapers and casual conversation.

Couriers, ambassadors and private messengers, travelling by foot, ship and mainly on horse brought news at widely varying rates, and the development of a more sophisticated postal system in the seventeenth century did not, in the short term, greatly alleviate the irregularities in news circulation that were worsened in times of disaster or upheaval like the plagues that struck London in 1603, 1625 and 1663, or the Great Fire (which in addition to burning down the Letter Office, halted publication of the London Gazette for a week, while utterly destroying its rivals). The Civil War on the whole propelled the spread of news (of which it was the dominant though not exclusive subject), the energies and resources devoted to communications more than compensating for the countervailing disruption occasioned by the existence of hostile camps and the blockage of major roads and bridges. These reticents should not, of course, be underestimated, as contemporary complaints suggest. Writing to the earl of Essex on 26 May 1645, Sir Samuel Luke provided the Parliamentary commander with news from the garrison at Newport Pagnell, though he warned that it might be ‘stale by the slowness of the messenger.’ At other times news could travel very fast. Luke wrote to his brother, Sir Oliver, three weeks later, that his bearer had come in ‘good time,’ and had been dispatched back again almost immediately. Yet the very slowness and unreliability of ordinary channels — the local officials who were supposed to keep the government informed — contributed to improvements, forcing central officials like the Cromwellian Secretary,
John Thurloe, to employ networks of agents and spies, much as his Elizabethan predecessor Sir Francis Walsingham had done in peacetime.

The gathering of information and the careful control of its release in the press indeed became one of the Secretary of State's major functions after the Restoration, as illustrated in the newsletters regularly dispatched in the 1660s and 1670s, at a subscription cost of about £5 a year, by individuals such as Henry Oldenburg or Henry Muddiman, and especially by writers working for the Secretaries of State, Henry Bennet earl of Arlington, his colleague, Sir William Morrice, and Arlington's subordinate and then successor, Sir Joseph Williamson.46 Caroline and Commonwealth improvements to the postal system were maintained at the Restoration with the 1660 Post Office Act (12 Car. II cap. 35), which made permanent the removal of the office from private hands and set standard rates. The Act was accompanied by a purge of the office's suspect ex-Cromwellian leadership; the use of the post to send and receive news was further aided by the exemption of news-factors like Muddiman from the inland postage cost of 2d for the first eighty miles and 3d for anywhere else in England and Wales, a relatively high cost by contemporary standards.47

Beginning with certain royal proclamations and with the short chronicles published by men like William Rastell and Richard Grafton in the early to mid-1500s, news had begun to make its way into print, albeit initially at a turgid rate. The next step, taken in the early seventeenth century, was the publication of monthly and then weekly 'newsbooks,' such as the foreign corantos that crept into England slowly prior to 1620 and thereafter much faster.48 These initially had to be imported from Antwerp or from the Dutch Republic. In 1621, the government permitted their printing in London (so long as they stuck to foreign news and left domestic matters alone) thereby further reducing the time between the occurrence of events and their printing, since the news could travel faster across the channel in pre-print form, and increasing the volume of copies that could be quickly distributed. Beginning in October 1623, the first of several numbered series appeared, initiating a tentative regularity — of titles rather than intervals of publication — to the production of news.49 Pamphlets such as Mercurius Britannicus (not to be confused with its parliamentarian namesake of the 1640s, Mercurius Britannicus with one 'n') began to proliferate.50 By the early 1640s, according to one estimate, about 1,000 separate issues of a number of these corantos had been published, though only about one-third of these have survived.51 For various reasons, including complaints from the Spanish ambassador; Charles I suppressed the corantos in 1632, thereafter allowing only slower 'annuals' like the Swedish Intelligence to be printed in the kingdom. Once again the letter-writers had to fill the void for their gentry customers, though the corantos were revived in 1638, under their earlier printers, Nathaniel Butter and Nicholasbourne.52

In his play The Staple of News (1631), Ben Jonson asked the question whether news remained news once it was committed to print, thereby identifying a distinction between history and current events that, I have posited, was emerging at exactly this time. Indeed, even a decade earlier, in his Twelfth Night masque,
The degree to which the recipient of news did not distinguish between information conveyed orally and that conveyed in writing, even in the early eighteenth century, appears in the detailed record afforded by one diarist in the reign of Queen Anne, Henry Prescott. The deputy registrar of the diocese of Chester, Prescott was a lazy functionary with a higher devotion to drink and conversation than to ecclesiastical law. He was, however, an inveterate news-hound who daily recorded the bits of information that came his way through personal contact, conversation at alehouses and coffeehouses, correspondence, and what he called 'the public news.' Figure 1 breaks down the news that he recorded by subject.

![Figure 1](attachment://Figure1.jpg)

Note: Sources include personal information, letters, alehouse/coffeeshouse discourse and the 'public news'

Source: *The Diary of Henry Prescott LL.B*, vol. 1, J.M. Addy, ed., Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, 127

Aside from a large unspecified category of general 'news' that he records without further detail as to its subject (about one quarter of all references), he paid about the same attention to local matters, or those involving his immediate family, as he did to domestic British politics. Either despite or because of his employment as a
lay official of the Church, he had little interest in recording news involving religion and the Church. But the chart makes it crystal clear that in the relative isolation of Chester, the news that regularly had the greatest impact on him was that of foreign affairs and especially war. In all, 169 references in the diary are concerned with international affairs. War had an ability to puncture the flow of time so effectively and shockingly that it could overwhelm the intake of other forms of news. Let us now see if some earlier cases of war had an equivalent effect on the sense of the present.

News and current events

By the late 1620s, the production of corantos had become serialized and more systematic. Just as letter-writers such as Chamberlain gave their correspondents weekly updates on the events at court, so the publishers of newsbooks at home and abroad realized that they could sell more copies if they retained an audience from one week, or month, to the next. The repeated use of names like the *Swedish Intelligencer* or *Mercurius Britannicus*, suggests a nascent ‘brand loyalty’ among the readership, as readers bestowed their trust, and their pennies, on a publication that appeared at intervals. After 1641, ideological conflict would further the division and redivision of the readership of news along political lines: John Cleveland, the royalist poet, denounced parliamentary durnals as ‘urinals,’ as different from royalist newsbooks ‘as the Devill and his Exorcist; or as a black Witch coth [differ] from a white one, whose office is to unravell her enchantments.’ The proximity of events and the need to keep informed about them in turn affected the speed at which newsbooks were produced, since publishers wished their products to keep pace with events, rather than simply responding to them on an ad hoc basis. Regularity was thus added to newness and truth as a quality for the successful newsbook, something demonstrated once again by the increasing number of dated and numbered corantos in the *Short-title Catalogue* and later in the *Thomason Tracts*.  

The Thirty Years’ War did much to increase the importation of foreign news on a regular basis. Gustavus’ victories or the atrocities of Tilly’s troops remained remote events; though Protestants might fear the possible outcome of an imperial victory for the Reformation throughout Europe, though they might shudder at accounts of babies hurled into the flames by marauding Spanish soldiers, they had little sense of these events having an immediate effect on English life. Yet troubles for Protestantism in Germany were potentially deadly to Englishmen apprehensive for the future, their memories still fresh with Bloody Mary, the Armada, and the Gunpowder Plot. Even if they did not resonate in the same way as a crisis on home soil, they involved English mercenaries and money, an English princess in distress (the Electress Palatine), and rising fears about the future of reformed religion in England.

The vigour of public discussion of foreign affairs and court scandals in the 1620s and 1630s, whether in corantos, newsletters, or private correspondence, is difficult to deny. Yet it is possible to argue that the activities of the Long Parliament, the Irish Rebellion, and the Civil War that ensued in 1642 marked events different in kind as well as degree from anything that had preceded them, and that they produced in the 1640s newsbook a printed mirror that is just as distinguishable from its early Stuart predecessors. For the first time in 200 years, and the first time ever since the advent of printing, large armies were fighting battles not across the Channel but right at home, on British soil, and in all three kingdoms at the same time. This would happen only on a much smaller scale after 1660 and would cease altogether with Culloden in 1716. To read of military religious and political developments became not just a matter of interest (though that it surely was), but also potentially one of survival; to publish such accounts offered not simply the prospect of a small monetary gain but an opportunity to fight a propaganda campaign that was unprecedented, at least in scale and duration, in English history. And once the hand of the censor was lifted in 1641, even the shaky control of news exercised by the Elizabethan and early Stuart regimes ceased to exist. The result was a veritable flood of pamphlets, parliamentary speeches, and especially newsbooks, beginning with The Heads of Several Proceedings in this Present Parliament (22-29 November 1641), produced with weekly regularity, each presenting an account of recent events that was both up to date and, from the point of view of the side generating it, ‘true.’ In 1642 came greater regularity as a few newsbooks established themselves under titles like *A Perfect Diurnall*, and as each day of the week became the publishing territory of rival series. The printed word was occasionally supplemented by woodcuts, the effectiveness of graphic representations having been demonstrated much earlier in such Elizabethan works as Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments.*

The distribution of news was not, even then, confined to the newsbooks, as testified by the continuation of pre-war practices, such as the dispatching of manuscript newsletters by professional writers who specialized in providing weekly information to rural subscribers; booksellers now took on extra copyists or employed scriveners in order to service their swelling subscription lists.

Alastair Bellany has rightly remarked that the news culture of the half century before 1640 had set the stage for the ‘phenomenal growth of political expression and debate’ after the end of censorship. With such favourable conditions in place, the volume of printed and written material was in itself sufficient to carry news through different parts of the realm in an unparalleled volume and with unprecedented regularity; and, as Joad Raymond points out, even in small runs of 250 to 1,000 copies, the same newsbooks would be re-read by several readers over a period of days elsewhere in the provinces. This represented a major increase in the flow, density and commonality of news even though it brought with it, as we will see further below, added problems for recipients unable to distil truth from propaganda, reality from rumour.

The flip side of a current event is ‘public opinion,’ the collective if discordant responses of the readers or hearers of news to what that news means, whether it is good or bad, and, most important, what should be done about it. The petitions produced on the eve of and throughout the Civil War represent among other
The desperate urgency with which the newsbooks were greeted may have abated with the temporary cessation of armed hostility in 1646, but not the appetite for their information. Despite the ban on newspapers other than the official Gazette from 1666 to 1679 and again from 1682, the attempts of successive regimes throughout the Interregnum and Restoration to restrict the publication of all domestic news proved largely futile, notwithstanding the scrutiny of watchdogs like Sir Roger L'Estrange, Charles II's Surveyor of the Press. The proclamation issued by Charles II's government in 1680, at the height of the Exclusion Crisis, which attempted to suppress the unlicensed printing and distribution of news, was a desperate barn-door locking after the horse had escaped. Nailed awkwardly back into place in 1682, the door squeaked open again in 1688–89. It would come off its hinges for good in 1695, though the use of 'general warrants' issued by the Secretaries of State remained a frequent but controverted practice until the time of John Wilkes and the North-Briton in the 1760s.²⁷

On the theory that the best defence lay less in a sieve-like censorship than in the good offence of an official and Crown-friendly publication, the later Stuart period saw the advent of L'Estrange's own Intelligencer (1663) and then the London Gazette (1665), which for its first few months, while the Court was in Oxford fleeing the Plague, was published both there and in the City. That the government felt compelled to supply an official outlet for news at all - not something done under any preceding regime (if we exclude proclamations) - is a mark of how news-oriented English society had become in the ensuing two decades. These papers to some degree competed for the most interesting stories with the manuscript newsletter services largely controlled by L'Estrange's rival, Williamson, and by Henry Muddiman, whose own current Intelligence was put out of business by the Great Fire within weeks of its initiation.²⁸ The Gazette was the monarchical successor to two Marchamont Nedham-run official publications of the 1650s, Mercurius Politicus and the Publick Intelligencer (which enjoyed an official monopoly after the Cromwellian crack-down on newsbooks in 1655), and to Nedham's 1659–60 successors Mercurius Publicus and the Parliamentary Intelligencer, run by General Monck's client Muddiman. Boasting the barred rubric 'published by authority,' the Gazette first appeared in a double-column broadsheet, before evolving into a four-page format. It enjoyed special status as an official publication, despite the relative sparseness of domestic news and outlasted most of its contemporary rivals, holding a virtual monopoly between 1666 and 1679. In May of that year, the expiration of the 1662 Licensing Act owing to Charles II's prorogation of Parliament permitted a brief window of three years during which nearly forty different papers were published, many of them short-lived.²⁹

Both the London Gazette and the other papers that sprang up briefly during the Exclusion Crisis signify that the old weekly or bi-weekly newsbook was on its way to becoming, in form and frequency, the new newspaper. By the turn of the seventeenth into the eighteenth century, the transition to a daily issue of the same series had been achieved in such titles as the Daily Courant (a morning paper) and the Evening Post.²⁹ With the dailies came the thrice-weekly Posts of William III's reign, and then the literary periodicals such as the Guardian, Tatler,
and Spectator. These functioned as the printed link between members of different clubs and coffee-houses, which were themselves active agents in the dissemination of news, blending oral rumour with writing and print into a pastiche of contemporaneity. The dailies even introduced an early sort of stop-press instrument to allow up-to-the-hour additions, in the form of 'postscripts' which began as handwritten notes in the margins of printed papers, and soon became printed sheets separately issued, albeit without an explicitly advertised connection to their parent paper. Only further improvements in communications, in the nineteenth century, would seriously reduce the lag between an event and its recounting in the press.

**News and history**

There was one further consequence of the creation of a meaningful present, which was the amicable but permanent separation of news from history. The corantos and early newbooks of the 1620s speak of news as history and often were published under the rubric of history, a further reinforcement of the argument that at its earliest stage the published news was perceived as a record of the recent past, not of an ongoing present. During the 1640s and later, writers such as John Cleveland drew a sharp contrast between the dignity and truthfulness of history — at a time when it was losing both — and the vulgarity, lack of elegance, and sensationalism of the newbooks, 'the embryo of history slinked before maturity.' Cleveland would not have been pleased at the manner in which the contents of yesterday's newbooks reappeared, from the late 1640s onward, as today's histories in writers from Joshua Sprigge through William Dugdale and John Rushworth. References to the word 'history' in newspapers of every sort decline sharply in the second half of the century, though the term 'chronicle,' no longer in vogue among historians, would enjoy a second life as a purveyor of news, and though, too, the former close relation of the two is conveyed in Steele's reference to newbooks as 'weekly historians.' It is perhaps significant that when two formerly independent papers, the Post-man and The Historical Account were merged in 1693 and for a time published under both titles, the 'historical account' subtitle was soon dropped. There were, naturally, exceptions. But even in a paper of the 1730s entitled The Historical Journal, the serialized History of England from the Earliest Accounts of Time Down to the Reign of his Present Majesty King George II that it provided readers (an adaptation of Paul de Rapin-Thoyras' popular history) was deliberately kept separate from the news, and printed as a detachable half-sheet supplement.

News had not, of course, displaced history as a subject of discussion. But it had definitively established the present as a zone of activity, as narratable as the past, but distinguishable from it, and thereby constructed a public space within which events could enjoy their ephemeral life before slipping into the maw of history. A very clear expression of the proper spheres of history and news comes from 1733, when Eustace Budgell tried to evade the latest (1725) Stamp Tax on newspapers. Successive governments since 1712 had been obliging the publishers of newspapers carrying recent intelligence to use stamped paper. Budgell was the author of The Bee, or, Universal Weekly Pamphlet, and he had neglected to apply to the Commissioners of the Stamp Revenue for exemption by virtue of his publication being a three-sheet pamphlet rather than a newspaper proper (pamphlets over a certain number of sheets were counted as books and exempted). Accordingly, The Bee was taken as a 'Weekly Collection of news' and entered at the Stamp Office as a newspaper, which should be printed on a half-sheet with the half-penny stamp. Budgell protested that his publication, insofar as it contained news at all, as opposed to other matter, was not a newspaper but a magazine, like the London Magazine or Gentleman's Magazine. The publisher of the London Magazine, however, was keen to defend the commercial advantage of his own exemption. He therefore made the case that his publication was qualitatively different from Budgell's because as a monthly its news was by definition no longer current, hence not news at all but history:

The true Import and Meaning of the Word NEWS is the Return of Intelligence of any Kind, by the Posts Foreign or Domestic. But all Transactions of a Month's standing, are, long within that Time, recorded in the Secretary of State's Office, then, by the Law of Nations, become Memorials, and all future Recitals of them, fall under the proper, and only, Denomination of HISTORY.

At the end of a month, Budgell's enemy pointed out, all intelligence collections were bound up and indexed — essentially turned into history books. Any attempt to include such materials under the coverage of the tax was in his view ludicrous and 'might as well include Josephus, Rapin's History, and Baker's Chronicle,' all three of which works had recently been serialized. The removal of news from the realm of the historical was not absolute — since the present inescapably emerges from the past it never can be. The diarist Lady Sarah Cowper indiscriminately classified her snippets of news together with stories under the marginal rubric 'histories,' and she makes a telling comment in 1713 that speaks to news and history being close relations, but not identical because of the temporal spheres in which they operate:

History and news are so nearly alliad that the only difference seems to be; the one informs us of what was done in times remote from us, and the other of what is so late as may be properly call'd present and in being; if anything which depends on time may deserve that name. It serves to shew how like the several ages of the world have been to one another, what wars, and revolution monarchy's erected, empires pull'd down; citiy's built and destroy'd. Ravages, alliances, treaties, and all the other variety's wee see in our daye, have gone on in a course of succession since the earth has been inhabited.
The past helped Cowper, like most readers, to make sense of the present, and the present to understand the nature of events in the past.

By the end of the seventeenth century, events were seen to be part of an ongoing historical process continuing into the future, a process that could be broken down into weekly, daily or even smaller units. Various links between the media that conveyed the present and those that commemorated and interpreted more remote events continued to exert an attraction to readers, not least of all the family of genres that includes the salacious 'narratives' or 'true narratives' or 'true accounts,' as they often titled themselves, of crime and punishment, scaffold speeches, and reports of miracles and miraculous cures, as well as the occasional chronique scandaloise of misconduct among the famous. An examination of the 'news' contained in one major collection, the Pepys ballads, indicates a concern with events ranging from the apparently trivial, such as the cow that ran into Clerkenwell church during a sermon in 1689, or the 'Somersetshire wonder,' a calf born with the face of a woman, to major political and military events. As Paul Hunter writes, there is a strong sense in the titles of most such works that they are 'helping to write the full history of the times and ultimately of reality itself.'

News, rumour, distrust, and anxiety

The presence of the present in news was not universally welcomed. In addition to the anxiety occasioned by the onrush of information, there remained throughout the period a deep distrust of news because it was both new and difficult to verify. News lacked the air of authority that surrounded old texts. Vocalized, it could scarcely be distinguished from rumour, a faetori when it emanated at second hand, or from a less than credible source. Print did not help since for many readers and writers in the first two centuries after Caxton, printed publication constituted a stigma that made a communication or utterance inherently less trustworthy than a manuscript text. "When a piece of false intelligence gets into one paper," reported the Craftsman in 1734, "it commonly runs thro' them all, unless timely contradicted by those who are acquainted with the particular circumstances." Steven Shapin has argued that in the realm of science, truth was increasingly thought to issue exclusively from the mouths of the social elite, and particularly from those of good 'credit.' Shapin's point can be supported from fields other than science, news among them. In the credibility of news, however, other elements more than social degree were important, such as political and religious affiliation: put simply, one inclined to believe one's friends and disbelieve one's enemies. Dudley Ryder, a constant reader of newspapers and haunter of coffee houses, was keen to get a good seat at the execution of the Jacobite earl of Derwentwater in 1716. Ryder discounted the news presented by his lodging-house maid, to the effect that the earl and his condemned comrades had been reprieved, because its original source had been a fellow lodger of Tory persuasion, and 'the Tories love to deceive themselves with agreeable news.' He was uncertain enough, however, to go straight into town and make sure of his facts, arriving just in time to get a perfect view of the falling heads.

Such distrust existed throughout the early modern period, but it did little to kill the appetite for news. As Thomas Cromwell remarked to John Creke in 1523, 'news refresheth the spirit of life.' Throughout the period, thirst for news, like innovation in general, provided a target for wits. In about 1516, the court poet John Skelton commented that news had made men worse gossips than women:

For men be now tatlers and tellers of tales;
What tidings at Totham, what news in Wales,
What shippis are sailing to Scallis Malis,
And all is not worth a couple of nut shalis.

Bishop John Jewel, writing to Bishop John Parkhurst in 1553, refused to report any news, punningly remarking that, 'the old is more than enough.' In Chapman's play The Revenge of Bussy d'Ambois, Renel tells Clermont that if he wishes to be considered a 'gentleman well-qualified,' he must ask 'what the news is.' Clermont, in reply, refers to the Locrían princes who punished any newcomers who enquired as to the news:

Since commonly such brains are most delighted
With innovations, gossips' tales, and mischiefs.

A sermon preached at Whitehall in 1619 denounced the quest for news, which had become so widespread that 'Every man's religion is known by his news; the puritan talks of Bethlehem Gabor, &c.'

Such satires became more common in the 1620s, the decade of the corantos. In Jonson's News from the New World, to which I have already referred, the antimasque opens with a discussion between two heralds (the purveyors of oral news), a factor of news who writes letters to clients in the country, a printer and a chronicler.

1st herald: News, news, news!
2nd herald: Bold and brave news!
1st herald: New as the night they are born in.
2nd herald: Or the phant'rie that begot them.
1st herald: Excellent news!
2nd herald: Will you hear any news?

The printer then enquires as to the price of the news and is asked if anyone ever buys the news: has it, in short, become a commodity, like fish or corn? He responds that he is all in favour of selling it; in fact, being a printer, he makes his living hunting out news wherever it may be and selling printed versions of it. 'I'll give any thing for a good Copie now, be't true or false; so't be newes.' In 1626
Jonson returned to these themes at greater length in *The Staple of News*, performed in that year and first printed in 1631. In this work we meet a woman called Tale, one of a quartet of ‘gossips’ including Mirth, Censure and, significantly, Expectation. She enjoins Prologue to ‘Looke your Newes be new, and fresh, Mr. Prologue, and untainted, I shall find them else, if they be stale, or flye-blowne, quickly!’ It is not clear that ‘untainted’ necessarily means ‘truthful.’

Another exchange between several characters emphasizes the theme of information overload or ‘vast confusion’ we have seen in Burton’s *Anatomy*, before raising a related concern: the lack of any rubric by which to distinguish true and false, amid the Babel-like noise of the newest events. News addicts presented as inviting at least some of those who fed their habit; with allowances for the greater prominence of printed news, there is a close family resemblance between Skelton’s early Tudor remarks on news-hunger and an essay of two centuries later by Joseph Addison. This features an impoverished Political Upholsterer who is ‘the greatest newsmonger in our quarter.’ Up before dawn to read the *Postman*, he walks up and down town to check for Dutch mails. More anxious about the welfare of King Augustus than that of his own family, ‘He looked extremely thin in a dearth of news, and never enjoyed himself in a westery wind.’

But there was more to object to in news than simply its promotion of a perceived popular addiction to novelty. Another, and major, reason why commentators from one end of the period to the other were so suspicious of news — in whatever medium — was that it was so often either false or out of date. To counteract such well-established distrust, the newsbooks (rather like another, less regular, medium of news, the ballad, which was also subject to distrust), very early commonly emphasized two qualities in their titles. First, they stressed their newness, the excitement to be gained from reading them. In 1614, Philip Gawdy remarked to his nephew, Framlingham, ‘That newes is best in season, when it is newest, whether it be true, or false.’ Exactly a century later a letter printed in *The Spectator* made a comparable comment, but used the shorter time span of an hour as the measure of freshness. ‘A piece of news loses its flavour when it hath been an hour in the air.’ Title-page set-ups quickly developed the marketing technique of stressing the newness of their contents in a graphic anticipation of the modern headline, thereby predetermining the reader’s sense of what had become an important event. Second, they assured readers of their truth, each book claiming that it was the most up-to-date and reliable account of the events being related. Thus the most accomplished newsmonger of the 1640s, Marchamont Nedham, felt obliged in 1645 to declare that he was reporting events independently and without interference from his parliamentary masters; other pamphlets carried encouraging names like *The Moderate or Perfect Passages*. Both truth and newness were necessary claims, as in the different but no less important sense of having not been overtaken by further events. It might seem strange that writers had to make a special plea for the veracity of their accounts. That is because in democratic countries with a free press we now take it for granted that this should be so (though we are often disappointed) and demand immediate editorial retractions when it is not. The early modern mind, with its deep distrust of anything new and unsanctioned by authority, needed reassurance that what was contained in the newsbook was not idle rumour, or fancy. Not only was early modern news explicitly biased, it was also widely expected to be so. The modern goal of ‘objective’ and unopinionated reporting (whether or not it is ever, in practice, really achieved), would have seemed strange to news readers and writers of 300 years ago.

Rumour and report, said the Jacobean MP Sir Walter Cope, are ‘two bastards begotten by the people; the author seldom knowne.’ It was easy to invent tales, or simply to let one’s imagination creatively edit a piece of information and pass it on in greatly changed form. Robert Crowley pointed out some of the ill consequences of false news in the mid-sixteenth century in words reminiscent of Skelton’s earlier comparison between news and women’s gossip:

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Some men do delite
strange newes to invente,
Of this mannes doyng,
and that mannes intente;
What is done in Fraunce,
and in the Emperours lande;
And what thyng the Scottes
do nowe take in hande;
What the kyngge and his counsell
do intende to do;
Though for the most parte
it be nothing so.
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Such men cause murmuring, discontent, even sedition — a gloss on this epigram points out, ‘We sawe the experience of thys of late,’ referring to the rebellions of 1549.

It is not difficult to see why the incompleteness or uncertainty of news aroused anxiety. The godly steward of Northampton, Robert Woodford, expressed a grave sense of public fear of rumoured French and popish conspiracies in 1639, a good two years before the advent of a real cabal, the Army Plot, during the earl of Strafford’s trial. ‘The times in the apprehension of all seeme to be very doubtfull, and many feares we have of dangerous plots by French and papists.’ Tudor and Stuart governments, always acutely conscious of the danger of rumour and report, were consequently strict in the punishment of rumour-mongers. English law had long admitted the possibility of treason by words as opposed to acts; while the dissemination of false news was less obnoxious than treason, it was also much more commonplace. Statutes against
false news date from the late fifteenth century and were revived and enhanced under Elizabeth I. Lord Keeper Egerton noted in 1596 the dangers that false reports posed to due process. ‘Thought is free, but the tongue should be governed by knowledge;’ a false accusation could lead easily to the miscarriage of justice since ‘on common voice and rumour a man may be imprisoned.’

In 1628, Sir John Coke complained to the House of Commons that discussions of the Petition of Right had caused various rumours abroad, thereby damaging the king’s reputation; he claimed that news of ‘it had flown so far that I have a copy of it in Spanish in my pocket, that the people of England will not rely upon the King’s word.’

A single example from the late seventeenth century suggests that governments were not mistaken in being concerned about the overly free travelling of news, even if they were relatively powerless to do much about it. On the eve of the Revolution of 1688, rumours flew about the country of murdering armies of Irish, of popish conspiracies, and of ‘ferocious Laplanders clad in beardskins’ serving in William of Orange’s army. The Irish rumour — not the first of its kind — caused a minor panic in Yorkshire. As Abraham de la Pryme put it, ‘all was up in arms, yet nobody knew where they were to fight.’ What is most striking about this case is the degree to which, even in the age of printed news, such rumour moved much more quickly and devoutly by voice.

This newsre or report ran, as I say, quite through the country, and for all it was some weeks a running northward, yet no one letter appear’d out of the south concerning any such thing there till it was always gone past those places where these letters were to go.

What clearly began as orally-communicated rumour had thus made its way into written form, which inevitably appeared, as Jonson long before noted, to stamp it with a specious authority in the eyes of the foolish. Pryme soon learned, however, to be equally sceptical of the letters that followed the verbal reports north, which told of buried copper pots full of oil for boiling heretics, and of wild horses kept underground for years and fed on human flesh so that when the papists rose they would tear Protestants to pieces.

Deliberate distortion was not necessary for the truth of news to be lost amid competing rumours, fears and speculations. The degree of falsity often grew in direct proportion to the distance from the event, as the number of relayers of news expanded and the means of checking for accuracy diminished. Small wonder, then, that country gentry and Englishmen abroad were suspicious of any sort of news, but especially of that which came exclusively in oral form — not because print and writing were inherently more trustworthy but because letters and newspapers could provide a check on or confirmation of oral reports. The English Catholic Richard Verstegan, who lived much of his life in Antwerp, was confronted with conflicting information concerning recent anti-Catholic persecution in England when visited by two co-religionists in 1602. As he in turn wrote to Father Robert Parsons, the information from these men did not concur

with earlier reports, ‘yet had I rather write upon the relation of these two gentlemen, being known and of credit, then upon other reports of lesse certainty.’ During the anticipatory period of the Spanish Match in November 1623, the Norfolk gentleman Thomas Knyvett could only write that there was ‘a great deal of uncertaine newses.’ The court, however, was not much better informed: Sir John Coke received a message from London on 14 June that there was ‘as yet no news, no marriage,’ noting that ‘the scenes and the actors are so far off.’

Sometimes the problem was too many reports, and no basis for choosing one over another. Following developments in the Low Countries, the Norfolk gentleman and future judge, Francis Wyndham, was perplexed and anxious at contradictory accounts reaching him both direct from Flanders and via informants in his own county. Brilliana Harley had difficulty ascertaining, from her home in Herefordshire, the truth about negotiations at Westminster between the English and the Scots in March 1641. ‘Many rumors are in the country’ she noted; two months later, she wrote to her son reporting that ‘in the country they have in report hanged the archbishop.’ In fact, Laud was still under safe-keeping in the Tower: the rumour of his death was probably a confusion of reports concerning the execution of Strafford on 12 May.

Extraordinary circumstances might intervene to make news even harder to obtain and verify. The home counties, close to London, were normally in a good position to receive accurate reports. But in 1625, as the planned match of Charles I and Henrietta Maria drew near, the Suffolk incumbent John Rous, an assiduous reader and collector of corantos, was frustrated by a lack of news concerning this. ‘Newses of her arravell, and the occurrences thereof, was very little and very uncertaine in Norfolk,’ he observed, blaming this on the fact that the plague had forced Parliament to abandon London for Oxford, and was making travel dangerous. In October of the same year, Rous recorded from his corantos that Mansfield had defeated the emperor and slain the duke of Friedland (Wallenstein); he was inclined to believe this last rumor because ‘many corantoes confirmed it.’

Once again the greater density of news reports, and the ability to compare them, rather than their speed, was the decisive factor that invested the story with credibility.

The births and deaths of notables lent themselves most easily to rumour-mongering. Often reports of death were either ‘distorted’ or at least premature, if a person were known to be ill. The death of Jane Seymour was turned by rumour into a report of the death of the king himself. The London merchant tailor, Henry Machyn, recorded reports of the death of Edward VI in 1553, including the tale that ‘he was poissoned, as ever body says, wher now, thanke be unto God, ther be many of the false traytors browt to ther end.’ Two years later, the city was alive for a day or two with news that Queen Mary had given birth to a son:

The xxx day of Aprill and the last day of Aprill thydynges cam to London that the Quen[s] grace was delievered of a prynce, and so ther was grett
rynyng through London, and dyvers places Te Doun laudamus songe; and the
morow after yt was tornyd odurways to the pleur of God.\textsuperscript{115}

`hilp Gawdy noted anticypatory rumours concerning the fate of Mary Stuart in
587, climaxing in the unconfirmed reports of her beheading which unlike
the Tudor executions had not been public. `Much uncerteyne newes touching
the Queen of Skottes, in that she should have hied herself in the topp of a
lynnynge, and so by that meanes not being founde that they should have made
restrynt great search for her and then she might have escaped,' he wrote. `It is
tuche bothe thought and reported that she is execued, but the truthe not
trectly known.' In June 1633 a rumour reached Oxford that the earl of
Wundel (who died in 1646) had fallen from his horse while riding with the king's
rorgess into Scotland, `and being trod upon so dyd.' The diarist who recorded
his rumour, Thomas Crosfield, never remarked on the falsity of the information,
nd three years later noted that Arundel was about to visit the emperor in
Vienia to negotiate restoration of the Palatinate.\textsuperscript{116} Late seventeenth-century
writer-writers regularly report and then un-report such deaths as rumours were
ether verified or disproved. Richard Lapthorne warned his Devonshire client
Richard Coffin that although the bishop of Oxford had been twice declared
dead, he was merely ill. `Sir William Norrie's brother is not dead, as was
erected,' wrote one of Lord Wharton's correspondents, adding, a touch
opefully, `but `tis true he is very sick.'\textsuperscript{117}

The tendency to report news before it had actually happened or before the
acts were fully known was thus by no means an invention of the newspaper
ror. But the `determination to be first' that characterized the papers of the late
eventeenth century and which always had to be balanced precariously against
he urge to be `freshest,' made rumour and error a public institution.\textsuperscript{118} The
egularization of printed news reports and their greater availability in the second
half of the seventeenth century did little to prevent such errors; if anything, the
ressure of producing to pre-established deadlines increased the likelihood that a
ublished news report would be based on incomplete facts and require revision
subsequent issues. In September 1696, the news was abroad that the queen of
ipan was dying, or was dead, or had died but had a living foetus cut out of her
omach (an heir to the idiot Charles II), and that Louis XIV had died of boils
nd gout. Men laid wagers on the truth, only to discover days later that both
ouis (who, unfortunately for the nations of Europe, had two more decades in
im) and the Spanish queen (who lived until 1740) were still alive. On 17 June
99, the Flying-Post, bearing news from the Continent, prematurely described
he death of the duchess of Mazarin; in this case, the informants were only
ightly ahead of the time since the duchess did in fact expire a week later.\textsuperscript{119}
And in 1711, the British Mercury reported a tremendous defeat for the French that
had never occurred.\textsuperscript{120} This could happen, on a shorter time-scale, with
omestic news as well. Thomas Benskin tried to take advantage of his paper's
Domestick Intelligence appearance on Thursdays to report on the Oxford trial
nd expected conviction of Stephen College, the `Protestant Joiner' on

Wednesday 17 August 1681, but was defeated by College's own eloquence in his
defence, which stretched the trial into the small hours of Thursday morning, too
late for Benskin's paper.\textsuperscript{121}

It is difficult to resist the hypothesis that by the end of the seventeenth century
news and its readers existed in a love-hate relationship: the news was indispensa-
bale because it was now a critical channel by which individuals situated them-
thselves within the social present. But neither could it be altogether trusted,
whatever the medium. It is surely no coincidence that the trope of news's
uncertainty became such a commonplace at about the same time that both
writers and readers of history were beginning to have serious doubts about the
status of the historical record, and even of such hitherto unimpeachable sources
as the Bible. Sir Walter Ralegh, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, was
said to have torn up the continuation of his gargantuan History of the World in a
Pyrrhonist pique after he observed two eyewitnesses to a recent event unable to
agree in their accounts of it. Defoe, one hundred years later, defended Robinson
Crusoe's claim to historicity - taken by at least one critic as a meretricious attempt
to cover up a lie - by turning Raleigh's frustration on its head. In a passage
anticipatory of Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, Hans Kellner, and the
historians? This is nowhere better expressed than by Sarah Cowper, whose
remarks on the close relation of news and history have already been noted.
Cowper was a prodigous reader of history who also had her ear to the ground for
the public events that she recorded in her diary (though she claimed, disingenu-
ously never to read printed news). She would comment in 1702 (with reference
to disagreement among William III's physicians as to the condition of his body
at his death a few days earlier): `This age is enough to destroy the credit of
persons, and in 1711, the British Mercury reported a tremendous defeat for the French that
dad never occurred.\textsuperscript{120} This could happen, on a shorter time-scale, with
omestic news as well. Thomas Benskin tried to take advantage of his paper's
Domestick Intelligence appearance on Thursdays to report on the Oxford trial
nd expected conviction of Stephen College, the `Protestant Joiner' on

Conclusion
The availability of news reports, through oral, written and especially printed
media, in the second half of the seventeenth century, had consequences for
historical thought that we have not yet addressed. By focusing public attention on
the present, and on the hinge whereby present became past, the news also
occasioned interest in the converse: how the past evolved into or 'caused' the
present. It is no coincidence that historians during and after the Civil War turned
their attentions away from depicting long-dead medieval monarchs and toward
the study of very recent events, with news reports in many cases turning into
verbatim fodder for their historical accounts. One further by-product of this
attention to the contemporary was the restructuring of temporal connections
between past and present. In medieval and humanist historical thought, these
had been founded on similarity, comparison and metaphor rather than, as in the
modern historical tradition, proximity, continuity, and metonymy. Historiography
after 1640 also reveals the high degree of ideological fractualness, the com-
teting perspectives, that are the hallmark of the newsvooks, and which
occasioned similar concerns about objectivity and truth. These developments
might well have occurred without the mid-century proliferation of news. It is
probable that the Civil War would have found its aspiring Thucydides sooner or
later: Clarendon, who came closest to that ideal, relied more on personal
knowledge of the actors than on published reports. But it cannot be doubted
that the obsession with the present that marks public discourse from the 1640s on
helped to create a market for ‘contemporary history,’ a sub-genre that early
Stuart historians had expressly avoided.

Over the course of the seventeenth century, the news had also generated an
extended present of duration, not instant. Or, to put it another way, it had carved
out a ‘detemporalized zone’ between past and future, a zone that offered a space
for the discussion of current events analogous to Habermas’ emergent public
sphere. Within this zone, novelties cease to be mere ‘marvels,’ passively absorbed
into the fabric of tradition like a stucco wall. They become matters of ongoing
concern, actively discussed and engaged with, disruptive, anxiety-provoking, and
potentially significant steps in the movement toward newness and modernity. The
monsters and marvels that feature in the news and in pamphlet literature of
the 1640s and 1650s become signs of the times, not mere random instances of
natural caprice or divine intervention. As one modern psychologist has
observed, ‘a present orientation involves reflecting on the past and expecting the
future.’ The discussions of foreign affairs in the 1620s and 1630s, and
especially of the civil wars of the 1640s and early 1650s, dominated public
discourse for an extended period. They thereby encouraged the spread of news
in a regular basis and became the subject of that news. The evolving relationship
between news and history, and the redefinition of the connection between past
and present, is intimately connected to seventeenth-century people’s considerably
enhanced awareness of the moving currents within which they swam.

Notes

1 John Hunter, Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction
tween contemporaneity and pastness, hence between history and other genres
(including but not limited to prose fiction) has profited a great deal from Hunter’s
work though, as will be seen, I differ from him sharply in a number of respects. I
have also found helpful the very different though not incompatible (with Hunter)
account in Michael McKeon, The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740 (Baltimore

2 Hunter, Before Novels, p. 172.

3 The wideness of dispersal is crucial here: it was certainly possible for many people to
experience the same event simultaneously in earlier times, in close proximity, the
diaries of Renaissance merchants recording urban affairs being one example. But
such common experience did not extend very far geographically.

4 Stephen Kern, The Culture of Time and Space 1880–1918 (Cambridge, MA, 1983),
p. 65. 7.

5 Jurgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a
Category of Bourgeois Society, trans. T. Burger with Lawrence (Cambridge, MA, 1989;
first published 1962), pp. 16, 21–2, 254n. In Habermas’ study, Britain represents an
‘ideal case’ of the public sphere, and the regularity of news a crucial distinguishing
mark separating news reports of the sixteenth century with those of the seventeenth
and eighteenth centuries. While Habermas’ historical analysis is often simplistic and
occasionally misleading, I have none the less found his treatment of the public
sphere very useful. An application of his ideas to French politics after the Estates
General of 1614 can be found in J. Sawyer, Printed Poison: Pamphlet Propaganda, Faction
Politics, and the Public Sphere in Early Seventeenth-Century France (Berkeley, 1990). For a
critique of Habermas which brings out the importance of print, see David Zaret,
Religion, Science, and Printing in the Public Spheres of England, in Craig Cal-

6 Donald A. Norman, Learning and Memory (San Francisco, 1982), p. 10; compare M.

cited and discussed in G. J. Whitrow, The Natural Philosophy of Time (Oxford, 1980;

8 It will be obvious from this that I do not agree with the more pessimistic analysis of
C. John Sommerville, The News Revolution in England: Cultural Dynamics of Daily In-
formation (New York, 1996), which work nevertheless I have found a highly stimulating
encouragement to my own thinking about news and time. Sommerville, operating in
a tradition deriving from Walter J. Ong and, beyond that, Marshall McLuhan (and
ultimately Ben Jonson, for whom see further on) is of the view that the realities of
daily information, and the need to produce news to fill daily newspapers, had an
atomizing and disintegrative effect on the perception of reality. I would agree that
this possibility existed but would argue that the results of daily flow were, to the
contrary, socially and temporally integrative. My position on this is thus much closer
to that of Habermas in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.

9 Orrin E. Klapp, ‘Creeping Banality,’ in his Overload and Boredom: Essays on the Quality
proximity is still, of course, a factor: the tragic crash of Swissair flight 111 in early
September 1998, about fifteen miles from my house, was the present-defining event
there weeks after it had faded from the front pages and first thoughts of places and
people outside Nova Scotia.

10 My term ‘flow’ is thus comparable to the ‘periodicity’ that Joad Raymond argues
rapidly became an expectation of 1640s’ readers: Raymond, The Invention of the
Newspaper: English Newsbooks 1641–1649 (Oxford, 1996), p. 120.


Brian Austen, *English Provincial Posts* (Chichester, 1978), pp. 32–3; for more on the postal system and news see further below. On the varieties of news available in the earlier period, and their shading into printed news, I. A. Sharer's *Some forerunners of the Newspapers in English, 1476–1622* (Philadelphia, PA, 1929) remains highly useful.


The case for continuing contact is well made by David Cressey in *Coming Out: Migration and Communication Between England and New England in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1987).


The Great Diurnal of Nicholas Budlell of Little Crosby, Lancashire (Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, 1968–72), 3 vols, eds Frank Tyner and J. J. Bagley, I: 93.


Diplomatic dispatches had been a staple for newsletter writers such as John Pory from early in the seventeenth century; I am grateful to Sabrina Baron for reminding me of this point.


Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy,* p. 14. On the other hand, lack of news could also exact a sting from the bored. William Adams of Christ Church, Oxford, apologized to Thomas Tanner for his lack of significant news in 1699. 'If I could send thee a ream of paper full of news I would; but there is none here, but that Randal of Oriel has powdered his hair in order to be Bishop Talbot's chaplain': Adams to Tanner, 4 May 1699, Bodl. MS Tanner 21, fol. 39r-v.

Klapp, *Overload and Boredom,* pp. 53–70; M. Csikszentmihalyi, *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety* (San Francisco, CA, 1975), pp. 35–6; compare Georg Simmel's classic study of the overload of sensation in urban life, in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel,* ed. K. H. Wolff (Glencoe, IL, 1950), p. 415. Michael Hobart and Zachary Schilliman, *Information Ages* (Baltimore, MD, 1998) is an incisive overview of the relationship between knowledge, its vessels, and human capacity over several millennia; I am indebted to Professor Schilliman for sharing sections of the work with me prior to publication, and also for many conversations on this subject.

Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby 1599–1605, ed. Dorothy M. Meads (Boston, MA, 1930), pp. 165, 193, 282–3 n. 524. As Meads observes, a high constable such as Pollard would be a 'mine of information' since he had to get regular information from the constables of each parish in his area to pass on to the Quarter Sessions.


As will be argued below, the newsletter, already commonplace during the Hundred Years' War, interacted with the chronicle in the Middle Ages. But by the mid-seventeenth century, it was the diary's turn. For an example, see John Evelyn's summaries or paraphrases of events culled from newspapers: *Diary,* iii, p. 361, account of translation ceremony of Gilbert Sheldon from London to Canterbury.


Tudors; but then and in the early Stuart era, however, ballads (in contrast to Jacobean and Caroline libels and newsletters), generally steered clear of discussing the monarch and his policies.

Raymond, *Invention of the Newspaper*, pp. 9, 90.


Bellany, 'The Poisoning of Legitimacy,' p. 163. Elsewhere (p. 150), Bellany points out that the copying habits of the gentry 'helped prolong scandals, transforming items that originally circulated as news into artefacts [sic] of recent history.'

For example, *Cheswold’s Triumphs, and Cyrones Crosses Lamentation in The Pepys Ballads* (Cambridge, 1887), 5 vols., ed. W. G. Dray, facsimile vol. I: 66; *The Man of the Kings Treaty at Westminster-Hall*, by the High Court of Justice, which verified the proceedings of the High Court of Justice: *ibid.,* facsimile vol. II: 204–5; *Englands Miseries Counsaile with Mercies* (one of several ballads on the Popish Plot): *ibid.,* II: 225. For other examples of such news ballads, see the brief selection in R. Palmer, *A Ballad History of England from 1588 to the Present Day* (1979). This remains the case today, since most people hear about an event at second hand and subsequently buy a newspaper or tune in to the evening news to find out about it in more detail. Raymond, *Invention of the Newspaper*, pp. 156–8, points out that many mid-century newspapers presented their materials in ways that imitated speech.


*Diary of John Roux*, Camden Society, original series, 66, p. 122; *Diary of Abraham de la Peyne*, pp. 97, 122, emphasis mine.

See, for example, the complaints by Philip Gowy to his father concerning carriers in the late sixteenth century: 'I knowe not whether the carryer hath performed his dutye or no, in that I heard not from any of your house' (14 December 1587); and 'If any newes els there be either I have not heard of it, or els it hath escaped my memory.' Some uncertainly speaks touching the poisoning of three or fewer great Kings and princes of late' (9 May 1588). *Letters of Philip Gowy of West Harling, Norfolk, and of London to Various Members of his Family 1579–1616* (1906), ed. I. H. Jeayes, pp. 30, 36.


The first postal 'system' dates back to Henry VIII's reign, and under several Tudor and early Stuart Masters of the Posts, six basic 'roads' or routes having been established by James I's reign, at which time a foreign postmaster was appointed for international posts. This system operated in parallel with informal measures such as private messengers and the 'common carrier.' The government system was not for private use initially but was opened to the public in the reign of Charles I, under whose regime standard rates for postage were first instituted and 'byposts' (subroutes off the main roads) first established under the direction of Thomas Withering, a London merchant placed in charge of what was then called the Letter Office in 1637. See Kevin Sharpe, 'Thomas Withering and the Reform of the Foreign Posts, 1632–46,' *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* 57 (1989): 149–64; see especially pp. 160–1 for average postal times to or from major centres like Vienna, Brussels, and Naples. The first Post Office Act was passed by the second Protectorate Parliament in 1657, creating the first General Post Office; the measures in this Act were confirmed by the Convention Parliament in 1660. From 1678 through the eighteenth century the Post Office was housed on Lombard Street in London. For the development of the post, see the following: M. Ashley, *John Wildman: Plotter and Postmaster* (1947); *ibid.,* 'John Wildman and the Post Office,' in R. Ollard and P. Tudor-Craig, *Sir Veronica Wedgwood These* (1980), pp. 204–16. More general accounts can be found in J. C. Hemmeeen, *The History of the British Post Office* (Cambridge, MA, 1912), pp. 3–33; H. Robinson, *The British Post Office: A History* (Princeton, NJ, 1948), pp. 3–112; and K. Ellis, *The Post Office in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1958), pp. 1–8. A new study of the post in the seventeenth century would be welcome. The difficulties of and procedures used in the inland posts emerge from the documents summarises (principally references to the State Papers and Acts of the Privy Council) in J. W. M. Stone, *The Inland Posts (1392–1672): A Calendar of Historical Documents* (1887) and in R. M. Wilcock, *England’s Postal History, to 1840* (1975); local posts are discussed, principally for Kent, in Austen, *English Provincial Posts*. For the use of the posts in the circulation of news into and out of London, and Maddiman’s exemption, see Sutherland, *The Restoration Newspaper*, p. 92.


Joseph Frank, *The Beginnings of the English Newspaper, 1620–1660* (Cambridge, MA, 1961), pp. 8, 13, estimates an initial circulation of between 250 and 500 copies of each number; a comparison of this with the figure of 6,000 copies per number of the Gazette alone (only one of many papers and not the most popular) in 1704, or of E. Dobree’s weekly *London Journal* (15,000 per week in its proprietor’s 1722 estimate) is about as effective an illustration as can be found of the increase in news circulation during the seventeenth century. J. B. Sutherland, *The Circulation of Newspapers and Literary Periodicals, 1700–50*, *The Library*, 4th series, 15 (1935): 110–24.

From the mid-seventeenth century, towns often kept newsbooks and newspapers available for the public: the chamberlain’s accounts for Leicester contain numerous references to funds disbursed ‘for news books and other things,’ generally at a cost of £3 17s or £4 a year: *Records of the Borough of Leicester* (Cambridge, 1923), ed. Helen Stocks, pp. 518, 534; when one John Ley provided the mayor with twenty-one newsbooks in 1661–62, he was paid 5s 9d.


Levy, *How Information Spread Among the Gentry,* p. 20 ff; Bellany, *Poisoning of Legitimacy,* p. 64. On the other hand, the transmission of such materials could be frustratingly slow, since it was dependent not only on the vagaries of transportation (worstened if cross-channel travel was involved), but on the speed at which the correspondent wrote. John Chamberlain wrote to Dudley Carleton on 6 March, 1619, to convey the news of Queen Anne’s death ‘about four o’clock that morning, being the second of this month.’ Carleton did not even commit his news to letter for four days
thing new included the sense of currency and immediacy to the events being captured therein.


69 Raymond, Invention of the Newspaper, pp. 108-11. Frank, Beginnings of the English Newspaper, pp. 21, 29, 67, 219. Like any new industry, the process of news publication had both winners and losers as many series fell by the wayside while others achieved greater stability: by 1653, under the stewardship of John Rushworth and Samuel Pecke, A Perfect Diurnall was able to rename itself The Perfect Diurnall. On Rushworth’s later career as a transformer of the newsbooks into his Historical Collections, see Raymond, Invention of the Newspaper, pp. 296-312.


71 For example, Bodl. MS Carte 228 (Wharton-Huntingdon collections), a set of newsletters to Philip, Lord Wharton, from various informants between 1656 and 1701; a set of these specifically devoted to news and in the same hand, from 1698 to 1701, is at fos. 253r-409v; BL MS Sloane 3925, fos. 1-336, collection of newsletters apparently intended for insertion in printed newspapers, 1696-92; BL MS Sloane 3929, newsletters collected by Henry Coley, 1670s–1680s.


73 Raymond, Invention of the Newspaper, pp. 233–38.


76 A Proclamation for Suppressing the Printing and Publishing of Unlicensed News-Books (1680: Wing C4346).

77 Fraser, Intelligence of the Secretaries of State, pp. 35–56; Marshall, Intelligence and Espionage in the Reign of Charles II, p. 60. These works supersede the older study by J. G. Mudiman, The King's Journalist 1659–1689 (1923).


79 Mcrison, The English Newspaper, pp. 5, 43; Sutherland, The Restoration Newspaper, pp. 30–1.

80 Robert J. Allen, The Clubs of Augustan London (Cambridge, MA, 1933). For the coffee house as meeting ground for the exchange of news, and in particular for its blurring of the distinction between oral and written news, see Hunter, Before Novels, p. 173. Robert Darnton has advanced a similar argument with regard to the interplay between oral news, rumour, libelles and books in the two or three decades prior to the French Revolution, and I am grateful to him for a discussion on this point.

81 Mcrison, The English Newspaper, pp. 62–70.

82 Raymond, Invention of the Newspaper, pp. 193, 269–312, quotation at p. 276 from Cleveland, A Character of a Diurnal-Maker (1654), pp. 3.

83 The Tatler, 3 and 12 [16 April and 7 May 1709] (1898–9, 4 vols, ed. George Aitken, I: 51, 106. In this usage, 'history' is given a new meaning as the record of current events, like the 'chronicle' or 'herald', while, conversely the period of 'time worth historicizing in public is reduced to a week.

84 Mcrison, The English Newspaper, pp. 60–1.
The first stamp duty, intended to reduce the number of newspapers as the Tory government of 1712 was bringing the War of the Spanish Succession to a close, imposed a duty of 2½d on a half sheet or less and 1d on a whole sheet, with a duty of 1s on printed advertisements. The 1725 Act increased the duty to 5d on every half sheet, forcing a change in format from the standard six-page paper to one made of a single half-sheet of large paper in order to minimize the effect of the duty: Sutherland, The Restoration Newspaper, p. 32.

Italics in original, quoted from Wiles, Serial Publication, pp. 55–8, citing J. Wilford’s London Magazine, the principal source for Budgell’s own claims and the attacks on them.

Hertfordshire RO, DEP F 54 (Panshanger MSS), diary of Sarah Cowper, vol. 6, p. 269 (1 August 1713). Addison, ever a trick-mirror of contemporary cultural practices, was only half in earnest when he satirized the ‘maggot’ quality of news by making it into history, referring to descriptions of the War of the Spanish Succession as ‘weekly historians.’ The Spectator, no. 443 (31 July 1712), ed. Bond, IV 63.

The Freighted People of Clerkenwell and the Somersetshire Wonder, in The Pepys Ballads, facsimile vol. IV, 343, 363; for ballads containing news of political events, which Pepys arranged chronologically under the rubric ‘State,’ see ibid., vol. II, pp. 201–374. The effect of this is to create a virtual ballad history of events from the execution of Charles I through the major crises of the next three reigns — Popish Plot and Exclusion Crisis, Rye House Plot, Monmouth’s rebellion and Jefferys’ Assizes, and the Revolution — culminating, at the end of Pepys’s life, in William III’s victories against Louis XIV.

The Diary of Dudley Ryder 1715–1716 (1939), ed. W. Matthews, p. 187; Steven Shapin, A Social History of Truth (Chicago, 1994); Shaaber, Some Forerunners of the Newspaper in England, pp. 236–42. The partisan politics of ‘Augustan’ news, which contributed to distrust, are discussed by W. A. Speck, ‘Politics and the Press,’ in The Press in English Society from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Centuries (London, Toronto, and Cranbury, NJ, 1986), pp. 47–65. As Speck points out, the distrust was not unfounded, particularly on the reporting of parliamentary activities and elections. On the other hand, readers did not ignore newsbooks and newspapers written by those of differing opinions: Raymond, Invention of the Newspaper, p. 255 and passim offers several examples of readers deliberately seeking out the newsbooks produced by the opposing side.


Diary of John Rous, p. 44. Even if this were an overstatement, it is true that enquiries for news, to say nothing of relations of it, could illustrate religious attitudes. Father Robert Southwell complained in 1591 that any news or rumor directed against Catholics was ‘currant, and goeth presently abrode corn prnvilegio,’ adding that ‘many
The Continent

From Copenhagen to Messina, from Wittenberg to Madrid, from Vienna to Paris, the political information business spanned the Continent. The following chapters portray a world in constant motion, a context of roiling political and social turmoil, where information was fed by convulsive changes of rule—in Naples, in Catalonia, in Holland; and where communication persisted in spite of repressive censorship mechanisms in some of these places.

In Naples, the Counter-Reformation and the Enlightenment collided in the 18th century, where communication was confined to the court and the church. The Inquisition suppressed all printed material that dared to challenge the orthodox teachings of the Church. In Catalonia, during the same period, the printing of political pamphlets was prohibited. In Holland, the authorities attempted to control the spread of ideas through the use of book censorship and book burning.

However, despite these efforts to control information, the continent was characterized by a vibrant cultural and intellectual life. The Enlightenment ideas of reason, liberty, and tolerance were spread through the printed word, despite the efforts of the Inquisition and the censorship of the authorities. The printed word became a means of expression for the thoughts and ideas of the people, a means of resistance against the oppressive regimes of the time.

The Council of Trent, which met from 1545 to 1563, was a turning point in the history of the Catholic Church. It marked the end of the Counter-Reformation and the beginning of the Enlightenment. The Council of Trent was a response to the Protestant Reformation, which had challenged the authority of the Church and its dogma. The Council of Trent attempted to restore the power of the Church and its teachings, but it also paved the way for the spread of ideas and the dissemination of information.

In conclusion, the continent was a place of contradictions, where the Inquisition and censorship coexisted with the spread of ideas and the dissemination of information. The printed word became a means of expression for the thoughts and ideas of the people, a means of resistance against the oppressive regimes of the time. The Council of Trent, which met from 1545 to 1563, was a turning point in the history of the Catholic Church. It marked the end of the Counter-Reformation and the beginning of the Enlightenment. The Council of Trent was a response to the Protestant Reformation, which had challenged the authority of the Church and its dogma. The Council of Trent attempted to restore the power of the Church and its teachings, but it also paved the way for the spread of ideas and the dissemination of information.