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Daniel Defoe's Social Networks

COWAN Brian



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Abstract

Daniel Defoe was best known as a writer and his primary social networks grew out of his intense engagement with the print trade. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Defoe's sociability relied much less on interpersonal ties of family, friendship, religion or civic obligation. Instead, he constructed many different 'virtual' identities through his writings and his engagement with his readers. He was known as a 'scribbler' and his public identity was that of a controversial and prolific author. In this way, Defoe's style of social networking is closer to that of the twenty-first century than that of his own day.

Daniel Defoe (c. 1660-1731) had many social connections but he did not have many friends.¹ That is to say, his social networks were extensive but not particularly intensive; his ties tended to be weak rather than strong.² Perhaps more than just about any other of his contemporaries, Defoe crafted his social identity through print rather than through personal connections. Defoe was known to his contemporaries almost exclusively as a ‘scribbler’, and he revelled in the possibilities for virtual self fashioning afforded by crafting an identity through printed words on the page rather than as a flesh and blood human being who could be identified, and perhaps persecuted, for the things that he said or wrote. He lived three centuries before the invention of the internet, but Defoe pioneered the techniques of virtual self fashioning that have defined the digital age; like the avatars of contemporary social media such as Twitter and Facebook, Defoe attracted many followers who would be informed, entertained, and sometimes misled by his writings. Defoe did not know most of his readers personally, but he devoted most of his life to cultivating their attention.

Defoe was born into the standard early modern social world of familial, community and religious ties. His family name was ‘Foe’: Daniel was the son of a successful London tallow chandler and devout Puritan, James Foe (d. 1707). Born as he was at the moment when the monarchy and the Church of England were both restored to their traditional position at the pinnacle of political and ecclesiastical power after two decades of civil war and revolution, Defoe’s family heritage placed him at the centre of what would come to be known as ‘Dissent’, and Daniel would be a Dissenter for his whole life. His family’s minister was the renowned Presbyterian Samuel Annesley (c. 1620-1696), and he was educated at the Reverend Charles Morton's (1627-1698) dissenting academy in Newington Green. As a young man, Defoe would see his Dissenting community persecuted for their religious convictions and he would defend the rights of Dissenters to worship in accord with their consciences throughout his life.

Defoe’s relationship with the community of Dissenters would be as vexed as most of the rest of his personal relationships. He criticized the practice of ‘occasional conformity’, whereby some Dissenters would take holy communion with the established church in order to qualify for holding political office in accordance with the Test Act, as ‘playing Bo peep with God Almighty’.³ His notorious satire, *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters* (1702), horrified his Dissenting brethren as much as it did his high church enemies, who were the ostensible target of his ironic critique of anti-Dissenter prejudice.

The same could be said for Defoe’s political ties. His background and his beliefs planted him firmly in the camp of the Whig party. The Whigs emerged as defenders of the Protestant settlement in church and state in opposition to the prospect of the succession to the throne of James, the Roman Catholic Duke of York. After the Glorious Revolution that ended the reign of James II & VII, the Whigs counted on the support of the Dissenting community because they defended the Toleration Act (1689) that guaranteed their right to worship without persecution. Defoe would remain a staunch defender of the Glorious Revolution and the Toleration throughout his life. This did not mean that he would be a staunch Whig however.

After pleading guilty to the charge of seditious libel for authoring *The Shortest Way*, Defoe cut a deal with the wily Tory politician, Robert Harley (1661-1724) that resulted in him writing in support of Harley's moderate Tory politics, especially in his long-lasting periodical, *The Review* (1704-1713).⁴

Nevertheless, Defoe's relationship with Harley was always transactional for both parties: Harley wanted a skilled propagandist who would provide readers with reasons to trust his ministerial decisions and to defend him against criticisms from his opponents, both Whig and high church Tory. He also used Defoe as a spy who could convey valuable information back to his patron. Defoe wanted a patron who would provide him with monetary support and political protection. Both parties got what they wanted out of the relationship, although Defoe often claimed that Harley's support was insufficient. The relationship would always be an unequal one. Defoe's relationship with Robert Harley was largely a productive and mutually beneficial one. Harley rescued Defoe from ignominy at a moment when he most needed it, and Defoe provided Harley with a vigorous voice of support. When Harley's dream of supplanting the Whig duumvirate of Sidney Godolphin, Earl Godolphin (1645-1712) and John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough (1650-1722) came to fruition with the ministerial revolution of 1710, Defoe remained loyal and he continued to write in support of Harley's Tory ministry. Even after Harley's fall from power and subsequent disgrace under the new Hanoverian regime, Defoe would remain a committed advocate for the integrity of his old patron.⁵ Nevertheless, Defoe's relationship with Harley was always transactional for both parties: Harley wanted a skilled propagandist who would provide readers with reasons to trust his ministerial decisions and to defend him against criticisms from his opponents, both Whig and high church Tory. He also used Defoe as a spy who could convey valuable information back to his patron. Defoe wanted a patron who would provide him with monetary support and political protection. Both parties got what they wanted out of the relationship, although Defoe often claimed that Harley's support was insufficient. The relationship would always be an unequal one.

We find evidence of this inegalitarian relationship in Defoe's correspondence with Robert Harley, which comprise the majority of Defoe's surviving letters from Anne's reign. The editor of this correspondence observes that 'of the 278 letters and documents collected in this edition, 245 were written by Defoe and just 33 to him. Exchanges between Defoe and Harley account for 189 of the 278, but just 3 are from Harley to Defoe'.⁶ Defoe felt compelled to report back to Harley regularly, but Harley was not similarly obliged. Defoe's courting of Harley, as it were, offers one of the few examples where the author can be observed attempting to cultivate an enduring bond of friendship along the lines of those that characterised political sociability after the Glorious Revolution. The relationship never moved from patronage to friendship however. The difference in social status between Defoe and Harley was too great to ever allow the two men to see themselves as equals. Unlike the enduring bonds of friendship that animated the duumvirate of Godolphin and Marlborough, or those that made the Whig [Kit-Cat club](#) such an effective unit for cultural and political advocacy, Defoe's connection with Harley remained bound to the more hierarchical norms of a patron-client relationship.⁷

Defoe's family and civic ties were as thin as his friendships. He spoke fondly of his wife and his eight children (all but two of them living to adulthood), but his peripatetic lifestyle as well as his occasional need to hide from creditors and political enemies meant that he did not spend much time with them. No correspondence to or from his wife Mary survives; indeed, his only surviving letter to any woman was written to his daughter Sophia in 1729, just six weeks after her marriage to Henry Baker. Near the end of his life, Defoe lamented that he had 'not Seen Son or Daughter, Wife or Child, [for] Many Weeks and kno' not which Way to See them'. (Seager 877) Unlike most of his contemporaries, Defoe's social life was remarkably unhindered by familial or communal relationships. As a young man, he became a member of the London Butcher's Company in January 1687 and he served on the petty jury for his ward in Cornhill, but aside from fulfilling these civic obligations, Defoe was not an active participant in the forms of guild and parish sociability that structured early modern urban life. ⁸ He was more involved with voluntary societies such as the Societies for the Reformation of Manners (SRM) and the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK), particularly in Scotland, where he worked as a spy and political lobbyist in support of the British union for Harley. (Backsheider 235-40) Unlike many of his fellow writers, Defoe was not a clubbable man. He was not a member of genteel clubs of literati such as the [Kit-Cats](#) or [Addison](#)'s circle at Button's Coffee-House.

The world of print proved to be Defoe's most enduring social network. He began his career as an author as a young man in his early twenties. Later in life, he claimed that his first published work appeared in 1683 as an occasional tract warning against the wisdom of supporting the Ottoman Turks in their war against the Habsburgs, but no such work has survived, so this claim may have been a fabrication. The first work of Defoe's which survives and can be definitively attributed to him is *A Letter to a Dissenter from a Friend at The Hague* (1688), which challenged the wisdom of supporting King James II's attempts to repeal the Test Acts (Defoe, *An Appeal*, 51-52). From this point onwards, he would go on to write hundreds of works of varying length and quality. The most conservative estimate of Defoe's prolific output attributes 276 titles to his authorship.⁹ Most of Defoe's works were published anonymously or pseudonymously, a fact that has caused great consternation to scholars who have sought desperately to define an accurate canon of titles that can be definitively attributed to Defoe.¹⁰ Even the now famous novels, *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxana* (1724) cannot be unreservedly thought to be written by Defoe; neither work was attributed to him until long after his death in the later eighteenth century.¹¹

Defoe crafted a public persona as an author, and his ties to the world of print would prove to be the most enduring and important of his life. Defoe was one of the very few authors of the long eighteenth century who could earn a living through his writing, but he managed to do so only by cobbling together various sources of income. Payment for copy was only one source of revenue; he also sold advertisements as well as other services in his periodical, *The Review*, and of course, he relied on monetary support from his patron, Robert Harley as well as other influential members of the regime such as Godolphin and the Earl of Sunderland. John Oldmixon rather famously claimed that Harley 'paid *Foe* better than he did *Swift*, looking on him as the shrewder Head of the Two for Business'.¹² Defoe also worked with a wide variety of different booksellers and publishers, well over one hundred of them, and he

maintained ties solid enough to entice many of them to publish several of his many publications. (Cowan, 'Defoe's Connections') Even his rival authors could admire his talents. John Dunton referred to Defoe as 'a man of good parts, and very clear sense', adding that 'his conversation is ingenious and brisk enough' and 'the World is well satisfied that he is enterprising and *bold*'.¹³

Defoe used early modern print not just to earn a living but also to develop an entire personality and social presence that was 'virtual' in a way that is familiar to us in the early twenty-first century but was deeply unsettling to his contemporaries. He revelled in the ability of print to mislead and conceal as much as it could reveal. Whilst Defoe is known to most people today as a novelist, and above all as the author of *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), he was known to contemporaries as a satirist who had been punished by standing in the pillory for the crime of authoring a seditious libel. By contrast, Defoe advertised himself to the public as the author of a bestselling poem, *The True-Born Englishman* (1701). His long-running authorship of *The Review* earned him the nickname 'Mr. Review' and readers often confused Defoe the man with the authorial persona he created through the journal. Often writing anonymously, Defoe could pen tracts criticizing his own writings; he could adopt as many different voices in his works as his copious imagination permitted; and he could switch his political allegiances with the changing winds of the times. Above all, Defoe was a writer and his social networks derived from his need to earn money from his publications and to remain in the employ of those who controlled the presses. This status as a man of print marginalized him in his own lifetime, but it also enabled him to create a prodigious output of commentary and observations on his social and political world that continue to enthrall readers of his fiction and non-fiction alike up to the present day.

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[Roxana \(1724\)](#)