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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

Public opinion (journalism and communication)
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The Daily Courant.

Wednesday, March 11. 1702.

From the Harlem Courant, Dated March 18. N. S.

Naples, Feb. 22.

ON Wednesday laſt, our New Viceroy, the Duke of Eſcalona, arriv'd here with a Squadron of the Galleys of Sicily. He made his Entrance dreſt in a French habit; and to give us the greater Hopes of the King's coming hither, went to Lodge in one of the little Palaces, leaving the Royal one for his Majeſty. The Marquis of Grigni is alſo arriv'd here with a Regiment of French.

evening paper of any importance was the "Courier," which appeared in 1792.

It rose to great influence during the Napoleonic wars, having such famous contributors as Coleridge and Wordsworth. In 1827 a 24th share of this paper was sold for 5000 guineas. About 1840, however, the "Courier" began to decline and two years later was incorporated in the "Globe," now defunct.

Mots-clés

Books

Censorship

Newspapers

Periodicals

Public Sphere

Résumé

Journals and books played a relevant role in the construction of modern public opinion and the diffusion of new forms of sociability shrewdly investigated in the twentieth century. As some of the most significant scholars of cultural processes point out (such as Innis, Habermas, McLuhan, Williams), the construction of popular public opinion is one of the most significant characteristics of the eighteenth century, especially in England. Writers and poets (such as Swift, Pope, Richardson) became the main public figures in the sharing of information, opinions and collective reflections. This stems from the rise of the popular press and successful novels, in conjunction with improved editorial products and cultural and social gatherings. Eighteenth-century public opinion can be seen as an outstanding social medium, powerful enough to anticipate some forms of sociability that would appear later on.

In the eighteenth century, the increase in circulation of books and newspapers, and the opening of coffeehouses, led to the dawn of modern public opinion and increased the public

influence of writers, journalists, printers and poets, whose social relevance intermingled with the communicative innovations of the time. Especially in England, France, Northern Italy and the Holy Roman Empire, the Enlightenment featured the rise of new forms of sociability. Ahead of the Industrial Revolution, the appearance of the bourgeois orders soon became the cornerstone of an informative sensitivity founded on conversational patterns that contributed to mould sociability not only as a collective value and a human skill but also as a social practice at large.[1]

This aspect was investigated by some important sociologists and scholars of mass communication who dealt with the evolution of sociability in order to probe the spread of English public opinion: 'The monopoly position of the publishing trade had significant implications for the age of enlightenment in England'.[2] This is what Harold Innis pointed out in one of his conclusions in *The Bias of Communication* (1951), focused on the English publishing trade in the eighteenth century. Starting from the end of the seventeenth century, the evolution of the publishing trade, along with the rise of newspapers, coffeehouses and parliamentary organizations, participated in the construction of modern public opinion involving not only intellectuals, poets and writers, but also politicians, entrepreneurs and government representatives. They all took an active role in the construction of the building process of the public sphere, ahead of the advent of the Industrial Revolution and the electric age.

The spread of the ideals of Enlightenment sociability was hastened by the flourishing of books and journals thanks to the new print techniques: 'Travellers as well as books, be they novels or advice manuals, disseminated these new values, conveying the sense of a modern taste for sociable encounters.[3]

Print innovation merged with a craving for freedom of speech and thought, which were to be hindered by political control in the first two decades of the eighteenth century. The lapse of the Licensing Act (1695) did not end the risk of prosecution for printing controversial works and shifted the battle to the courts, particularly in prosecutions for seditious libel. The lapse was partly due to John Locke, who had complained about the Company of Stationers' monopoly over Greek and Latin texts. The monopoly produced the proliferation of ill-printed editions, as Locke himself denounced: 'our printing is so very bad, and yet so very dear in England' (Innis 143). Locke paid much attention to the quality of opinions, as Habermas pointed out: Locke 'could therefore present the *Law of Opinion* as a category of equal rank beside divine and state law; in the later editions of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, he stubbornly defended this position'.[4]

The *Law of Opinion and Reputation* aimed at offsetting the 'virtues and vices' of private and public lives, especially those belonging to famous and powerful politicians. In England, the transition from private to public opinion featured the sharing of one fundamental concept: public spirit. In 1793 Friedrich Georg Forster still preferred the older expression 'public spirit' rather than 'public opinion', even though both expressions were used as synonyms. In his articles published in *The Craftsman*, Lord Bolingbroke referred to public opinion so as to reinforce the relationship of political opposition to the 'sense of people' fostered by urgent

popular needs.5

Before the outbreak of the French Revolution, Edmund Burke dwelt on the idea of a 'general opinion' stemming from private reflection on public affairs as they were collectively debated. Also thanks to his famous *Speech to the electors of Bristol* (November 3, 1774), Burke had an outstanding influence on the growth of political consciousness, insofar as it was thought that the only way to share collective ideas and social purposes was to make them public.6 This is what Raymond Williams highlighted in the opening chapter of *Culture and Society* (1958), whose first paragraph is specifically dedicated to Edmund Burke and William Cobbett. Through his public speeches and political engagement, 'Burke is describing a process, based on recognition of the necessary complexity and difficulty of human affairs, and formulating itself, in consequence, as an essentially social and cooperative effort in control and reform'.7

The Press became a fundamental social medium. Thus, authoritative opinions might forge individual and collective orientations. The importance of journalists and writers was destined to grow, since print communication was about to become a profitable business which papermakers, printers and booksellers wanted to safeguard from piracy and smuggling. Their petition resulted in the Copyright Act, coming into effect on April 10, 1710, which protected the rights for the duration of 21 years if the book had been published before that date and 14 years if published after that date. If the author was still alive, protection could be renewed for an additional 14 years. A heavy tax was levied on paper imported from France and Holland and severe penalties were imposed on illegal importers of books.

By the end of the third English civil war (1651), the circulation of books had increased and news became a political weapon for undermining the credibility of rivals and opponents. Writers were hired by newspapers, editors, publishers and patrons. They were often enlisted to support parties in line with the communicative strategies pursued by Tories and Whigs. Coffeehouses became highly frequented news markets, and topical satire represented the most popular literary product, greatly appreciated by readers in search of political satire and intellectual derision.

Joseph Addison, Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift and Richard Steele gained a central role in the process of journalistic amplification of political and social events. Defoe's articles in *The Review* counterbalanced Swift's writings for *The Examiner*. The downfall of Marlborough and the Treaty of Utrecht (1713-1715) were partly achieved through the increasing influence of public opinion and the omnipresent press, as Swift's anti-war arguments in *The Conduct of the Allies* confirm. The more widespread public opinion was, the more intense government control had to be. Newspapers were brought under control soon after Walpole came to power, and opposition weakened.8

Addison and Steele owed their notoriety to the creation of *The Spectator*, whose innovative framework found a sensible balance between political and social criticism. *The Spectator* project contributed to the shaping of a new model of sociability. Addison adapted the essay within the leading article and developed Defoe's insight in merging novels with essays, thus

making 'a clear and substantial contribution to the emergence of both genres'.9 As a journalist, Defoe knew that popularity increased by caring little or nothing about politics. 'He combined pungent, persuasive political criticism with domestic news and bright social excursions. He made the newspapers an organ of initiative and reform and attempted complete independence' (Innis 144).

Because of several attempts to control public opinion through taxes and to forbid the publication of parliamentary debates, advertising increased and writers became authoritative public leaders. Satire and novels were successful editorial products that enabled witty writers to criticize not only power but also cultural figures. Restrictions on newspapers led to the supremacy of publishers over writers through efficient channels for the distribution of books and with the proliferation of small editions and a change in format, due to the high cost of paper and the low cost of typesetting.

Alexander Pope's *The Dunciad* (1728-1743) was a refined attack on mediocre writers and cunning publishers, as McLuhan wrote in the conclusion of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962). According to Innis, irony and satire were seen as social weapons capable of overstepping the limits imposed by the most insidious censorship. After the stamp tax of 1712, the beginning of Walpole's rise to power and the end of the wars, 'writers were compelled to turn to satire, miscellanies and compendia, the weekly newspapers, the monthly magazine, the novel and children's books' (Innis 155).

A successful form of literary communication was the proverb or aphorism, as Northrop Frye observed referring to William Blake's *Proverbs of Hell* in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-1793). Those proverbs can be read as parodies of proverbs that were shaped in line with an oracular, epiphanic inspiration.10 Blake foresaw the inevitable evolution of print art into aesthetic reification. Blake's editorial handmade craftsmanship made him a precursor of the Pre-Raphaelite Movement, as John Ruskin affirmed some decades later. Through his visions and esoteric symbols, Blake was the forerunner of modern communicative skills, as McLuhan has argued:

> Blake's diagnosis of the problem of his age was, like Pope's *The Dunciad*, a direct confrontation of the forces shaping human perception. That he sought mythical form by which to render his vision was both necessary and ineffectual. For myth is the mode of simultaneous awareness of a complex group of causes and effects.11

Progress and innovation generated new social mythologies, also inspired by political struggles and cultural queries emerging in the public sphere. The fluctuation between oral and written knowledge investigated by Walter J. Ong elicited new forms of sociability, which poets modelled in order to experiment new forms of language. Satire patterns were real communicative solutions, while commonplaces contributed to the sedimentation of shared opinions. In *Orality and Literacy* (1982) Ong mulled over the relationship between originality and ordinariness in England in the eighteenth century: 'The competent poet was supposed to

generate his own metrically fitted phrases. Commonplace thought might be tolerated, but not commonplace language.12

Thus, good writing intertwined with communicative experimentation in order to circumvent censorship and exploit the powerful influence of printers and booksellers. The concept of public opinion generated a new political awareness regarding accountability and transparency, as Habermas underlines in reference to Bentham's Constitutional Code, still in draft form when he died in 1832:

> Bentham conceived of the parliament's public deliberations as nothing but a part of the public deliberations of the public in general. Only publicity inside and outside the parliament could secure the continuity of critical political debate and its function, to transform domination, as Burke expressed it, from a matter of will into a matter of reason (Habermas 100).

In such a dynamic scenario, private and public life merged: letters, diaries, memoirs, confessions were highly appreciated literary media, as the birth of the epistolary novel demonstrates:

> *Pamela* in fact became a model, not indeed for letters, but for novels written in letters. Richardson himself, with *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*, was not the only one to stay with the form once it was found. When Rousseau used the form of the Novel in letters, for *La Nouvelle Heloise* and Goethe for *Werthers Leiden*, there was no longer any holding back (Habermas 50).

Laurence Sterne claimed a social role for the novelist through reflections and advice as they were sketches of scripts. Reality matched fiction, thus generating a new way to publicly consume private life.

At that moment, privacy, subjectivity and the family dimension became 'appealing to a wide public of readers' (Habermas 51). Lounges and salons contributed to promote public information and the companionable enjoyment of private life. Thanks to the availability of newspapers, coffeehouses and public houses were 'sealed spaces'13 where people debated political, social and cultural issues. This is what Richard Sennett expressed in *Flesh and Stone* (1994): 'The advent of modern newspapers in the later eighteenth century sharpened, if anything, the impulse to talk; displayed on racks in the room, the newspapers offered topics for discussion – the written word seeming no more certain than speech' (Sennett 345).

In the background was the process of colonial expansion and strategies fostered by the Crown, thanks also to the improvement of communicative devices. As Roger Silverstone pointed out, this was the beginning of liberal democracy:

> […] round the tables of the coffee-houses, on the pages of the newspapers, which began to provide political commentary as well as news and advertisements, and in the hallowed halls of public museums, libraries and universities. To discuss and to participate. To let reason rule in the affairs of the world. To influence and to command.14

Thus the public sphere contributed to the appearance of new forms of sociability, in an era marked by the journalistic publicity of private life.15

1. Some insightful examples of sociability linked to the rise of journalism and communication can be found in Anthony J. La Vopa, 'The Birth of Public Opinion', The Wilson Quarterly (vol. 15, no. 1, Winter 1991), p. 46-55.

2. Harold A. Innis, The Bias of Communication, intr. Alexander J. Watson (Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, 2007), p. 142.

3. Sebastian Domsch and Mascha Hansen (eds.), British Sociability in the European Enlightenment (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), p. 2.

4. Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), p. 91.

5. On the role played by women in the construction of modern public opinion see, for instance, Elizabeth Eger and Lucy Peltz, Brilliant Women: 18th Century Bluestockings (London: Yale University Press, 2008); Amanda Vickery (ed.), Women, Privilege and Power: British Politics, 1750 to the Present (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

6. For further investigation see Norbert Col, 'Sociability and the Glorious Revolution: A dubious Connection in Burke's Philosophy', in Valérie Capdeville and Alain Kerhevé (eds.), British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century: Challenging the Anglo-French Connection (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2019), p. 237-250.

7. Raymond Williams, Culture and Society, 1780-1950 (London: Vintage Classics, 2017), p. 18.

8. Sir Robert Walpole was regarded as de facto the first prime minister of Great Britain. On the relationship between power, politics and communication see Hannah Barker, Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth Century England (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2017).

9. Brian Cowan, 'Defoe's Review and the Transformations of the English Periodical', Huntington Library Quarterly (vol. 77, no. 1, Spring 2014), p. 79.

10. Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 401.

11. Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man (Toronto Buffalo London: University of Toronto Press, p. 300).

12. Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word (London-New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 22.

13. Richard Sennett, Flesh and Stone: the Body and the City in Western Civilization (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), p. 347.

14. Roger Silverstone, Why Study the Media? (London: Sage, 1999), p. 147.

15. See, for instance: Michael Hofmann, Habermas's public sphere: a critique (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2017); Robert C. Holub, Jürgen Habermas: Critic in the Public Sphere (London: Routledge, 2013).

Citer cet article

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Edmund Burke, Speech to the electors of Bristol (1774).

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