

The Nichols Collection, 1666–1737: Religion, Regulation and the Development of the Metropolitan Press

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The Nichols collection of seventeenth and eighteenth-century newspapers (1666–1737) encompasses a period about which there remains a lively debate among historians as to the religious temperature of British society. Recent scholarship has variously depicted the turn of the eighteenth century as the dawn of an ‘age of infidelity’, or at the crux of a religious revival wherein the Church of England was central to the foundation of new benevolent institutions and societies in England and Wales.¹ What is certain is that political and religious life in Britain was deeply interconnected throughout this period, and the development of the news trade was determined by attempts to regulate printed material that might threaten religious, political and social order. Using the contents of the Nichols collection as a guide, this essay identifies key moments in the development of the metropolitan press, and provides an introduction to the politico-religious background of three episodes of central importance to this process: the Popish Plot of 1678–1681, the

Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695. These staging points were crucial to the transformation of newspaper enterprises in Britain from a small, state-controlled monopoly to a diverse, nationwide marketplace in which millions of copies were sold annually.²

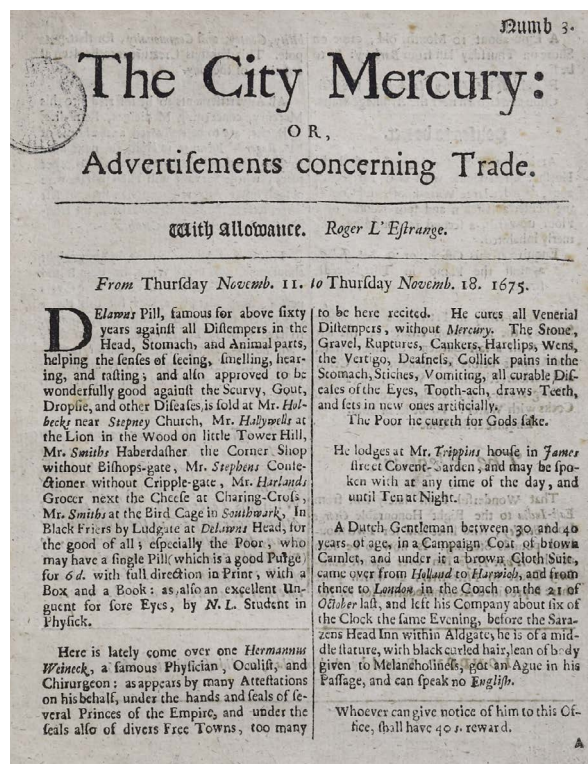
¹ Penelope J. Corfield, ‘An Age of Infidelity: Secularization in eighteenth century England’, in *Social History*, 39:2 (2014), pp. 229–247; Brent S. Sirota, *The Christian Monitors: The Church of England and the Age of Benevolence, 1680–1730* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

² Jeremy Black, *The English Press, 1621–1861* (Stroud: Sutton, 2001), p. 6.

The Restoration and the Press

The development of the metropolitan press after the Restoration was largely governed by the provisions of 'An Act for preventing the frequent Abuses in printing seditious, treasonable and unlicensed Books and Pamphlets, and for regulating of Printing and printing Presses'.³ The 'Licensing Act' (as it was commonly referenced) came into force on 10 June 1662, and sought to restore control over printing activity in England and Wales following the relative freedoms of the Interregnum; London, York and universities were designated as the only places in the country permitted to operate a press.⁴ The Act further specified that books on divinity produced in the Southern Province were to be licensed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who was also authorised (alongside the Bishop of London) to fill vacancies of master printers to the Stationers' Company.⁵ As such, the Act created a legal framework in which the Church was empowered to act for the State in regulating printing activity, and aligned the trade with renewed royal authority and the reinstatement of episcopal oversight of the Church of England.

In practice, however, these rights were soon delegated to the political pamphleteer Roger L'Estrange, who was created 'Surveyor of the Presses' in August 1663 by letters patent from Charles II. The regulatory powers of the Licensing Act also provided a means for better enforcing the Act of Uniformity, and L'Estrange was extremely active in pursuing those deemed to be acting against the King and the religious settlement of the Restoration. In October 1663, L'Estrange oversaw the arrest of the heterodox printer, John Twyn, who was subsequently tried and sentenced to be hanged, disembowelled and quartered for producing tracts against the House of Stuart that were deemed treasonable.⁶ A further condition of L'Estrange's patent was a complete monopoly over the publication of news, which he exercised until the Great Plague of 1665. With the removal of Charles II's court from London to Oxford, it was decided that the control of printed news should be placed in the hands of leading ministers. As such, L'Estrange was reluctantly displaced in favour of a newspaper directed by the Secretaries of State, titled the *Oxford Gazette*. 'Published by authority', the soon-renamed *London Gazette* became a 'state-directed commercial concern' that dominated the print news market for much of the remainder of the seventeenth century.⁷



Roger L'Estrange's *City Mercury*, the first newspaper in the Nichols collection. No.3. Vol. 1A.

Regulation tested: The Popish Plot, 1678–1681

The first great challenge to Charles II's licensing regulations and the dominance of the *London Gazette* came during the alleged Popish Plot of 1678–1681, which coincided with a lapse of the Licensing Act. The clergymen Titus Oates and Israel Tonge conspired to alert Charles II of an alleged Jesuit plot to either bring about the King's death, or oust the monarch in favour of his brother, James. Whilst these claims were initially greeted with scepticism, anti-Catholic alarm over the alleged plot soon entered the public domain, leading to a series of sensational libel trials and a period of prolonged political instability.⁸

³ 'Charles II, 1662: An Act for preventing the frequent Abuses in printing seditious treasonable and unlicensed Bookes and Pamphlets and for regulating of Printing and Printing Presses', in *Statutes of the Realm: Vol. 5, 1628–1680*, Raithby, John (ed.), pp. 428–435. British History Online [http://www.british-history.ac.uk/statutes-realm/vol5/pp428-435, accessed 1 May 2016]; the printer Stephen Bulkeley produced works in Newcastle immediately following the Restoration, but relocated to York after the passing of the 1662 Act. See Richard Welford, *Early Printing in Newcastle-upon-Tyne* (Newcastle: Cail & Sons, 1895), pp. 15–16.

⁴ Charles II, 1662: An Act for preventing the frequent Abuses in printing'.

⁵ Jeremy Black, *The English Press*, p. 6.

⁶ James Sutherland, *The Restoration Newspaper and Its Development*, pp. 1–2; Geoff Kemp, 'Twyn, John (bap. 1619, d. 1664)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan. 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/68209, accessed 8 Sept 2016].

⁷ Jeremy Black, *The English Press*, pp. 6–7.

⁸ Alan Marshall, 'Oates, Titus (1649–1705)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008 [http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/20437, accessed 9 Sept 2016].

Amid this unrest, the number of news titles in England increased to such an extent that by the end of 1679, 'more papers were being published than at any time since 1649'.⁹ This explosion of press activity can be observed in the Nichols collection, as printers aimed to capture the public mood with titles such as *The Catholick Intelligence, or Infallible News both Domestic & Forreign, The Loyal Intelligence, or News both from City and Country*, and *The True Protestant Mercury, or Occurrences Foreign and Domestick*. These overtly political titles were usually short-lived, responding to a public desire for news during times of national crisis. Their rate of publication abated when relative political stability was restored, but the model of these newspapers re-emerged during later periods, such as during the 1745 Rebellion, when titles such as the *Protestant York Courant* exploited Jacobite fears in the North of England.¹⁰



Examples of newspapers of the "Popish Plot" period.

The Glorious Revolution

During the Popish Plot, printers were able to exploit widespread anti-Catholic sentiments as long as the conspiracy was perceived to represent a genuine political threat. After several years of relative quiet in the newspaper trade in England, a polarising print debate and public alarm reached new heights during the reign of James II. By 1688, the King's attempts to increase the arbitrary power of the Crown, together with the alienation of many of his Protestant subjects, and fears of a ruling dynasty sympathetic to Catholics, led the nation to the point of constitutional crisis. With legitimacy achieved through an extensive print propaganda campaign, and an invitation to intervene from leading conspirators against the

King, the invasion of William and Mary of Orange, and James II's subsequent flight to France, was seen by many as godly deliverance from the prospect of Catholic dominion. In his *Discourse of God's ways of Disposing of Kingdoms* of 1691, Bishop William Lloyd summarised the necessity of adherence to the Church of England in securing the success of the Revolution:

It hath always been accounted the Bulwark of the Protestant Religion, and prov'd it self to be so most eminently in the last Reign; so it will appear to be the only unshaken strength of this Monarchy¹¹

The Glorious Revolution saw a spike in publishing activity, and the Nichols collection features newspapers founded in 1688 and 1689 which were almost unanimously favourable to William and Mary, such as the *London Courant* and the *English Currant*. Titles such as the *Orange Gazette* not only provided readers with both foreign and domestic reports hailing the success of the Revolution, but also aimed to profit through the advertisement of goods such as playing cards depicting 'in lively Cuts' William and Mary's progress to England, including their invitation by the leaders of the plot against James II, and the trial of the seven bishops.¹² Illustrative of the manner in which the *Orange Gazette* harnessed and reflected popular sentiment in favour of the Revolution, in February 1689 the newspaper gave an account of celebrations in Plymouth at the new monarchs' acceptance of the throne:

The blessed News coming to us, that WILLIAM and Mary Prince and Princess of Orange were Proclaimed King and Queen of England, &c. The Mayor and Aldermen in their formalities, with demonstration of their Joy and Satisfaction, Drums beating, and Musick playing before them, Proclaimed them also this Morning.¹³

Such loyalty also came with the possibility of great rewards. In the North of England, William and Mary showed particular favour to John White, who was appointed 'their Majesties printer for the city of York and the five Northern counties' in recognition of his activities during the Revolution.¹⁴

⁹ Jeremy Black, *The English Press*, p. 7.

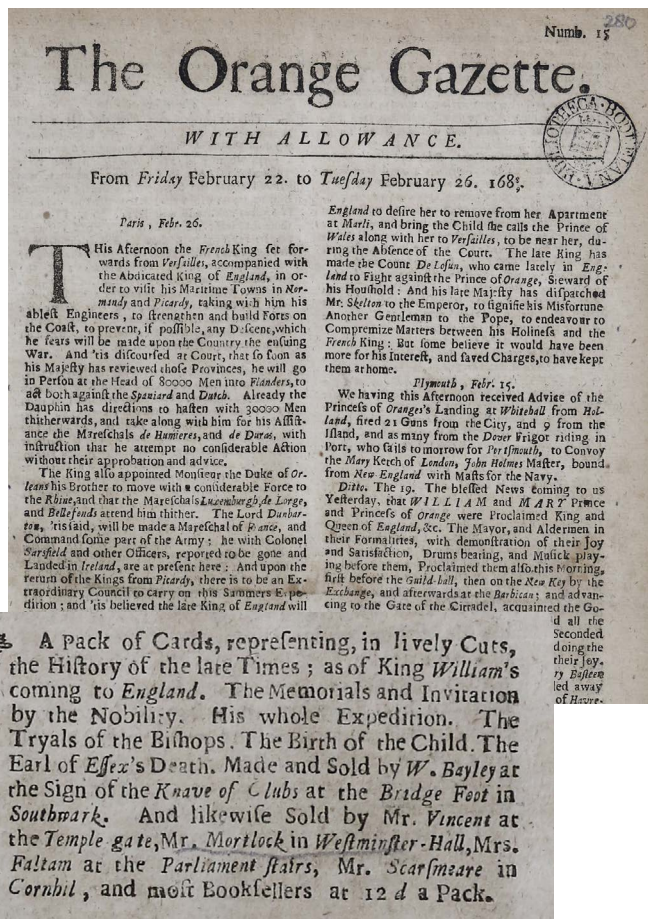
¹⁰ *Protestant York Courant* (York: John Gilfillan). The largest surviving files of this newspaper covering the period 1746 to 1753 are held by York Explore library and the Laurence Sterne Trust.

¹¹ William Lloyd, *A Discourse of God's ways of Disposing of Kingdoms*, pt. 1 (London: 1691); William Gibson, *James II and the Trial of the Seven Bishops* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹² *The Orange Gazette*, no. 15 (London: 22–26 February 1689).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Society of Antiquaries of London. SAL/MS/592, Warrant appointing John White to be King's printer at York; Hampton Court, 26 May 1689.



Advertising in *The Orange Gazette*, 26 February 1689.
No. 15, Vol. 7B

Lapse of the licensing laws, 1695

The decisive transformation in the development of newspapers during this period came with the final lapse of the licensing laws in 1695. Existing legislation was no longer deemed fit for purpose, but efforts to renew regulations faltered due to 'parliamentary divisions and a lack of parliamentary time'.¹⁵ This loosening of governmental control allowed the exponential growth of newspaper enterprises throughout the nation, many of which can be found in the Nichols collection. From 1695, titles such as the *Post Boy* and the *Flying Post* provided readers outside London with reliable weekly news for the first time.¹⁶ Also featured is London's first daily newspaper, the *Daily Courant*, which first appeared in 1702, and was soon rivalled by titles such as the *Daily Oracle*, *Daily Packet* and the *Daily Post*. Developments were not limited to the capital, however, as the first decade of the century also saw the establishment of regular newspapers printed outside London.¹⁷ This extension of the news market is represented in the collection by newspapers such as *Howgrave's Stamford Mercury* and the *Chester Weekly Journal*. Whilst many of these early provincial titles sought to reproduce the content of

metropolitan newspapers for a country audience, they soon began to report more widely on local affairs.

The end of pre-publication censorship of newspapers in the eighteenth century had the important consequence of removing many of the former limitations on the printing of political news. This led to the formation of an increasingly partisan press during the deeply divided reign of Queen Anne, as competing titles such as the *Examiner* and the *Medley* exploited contentious public debates in open 'newspaper war'.¹⁸ The exclusion of the Tories from political influence following the Hanoverian Succession of 1714 led to an extended period of Whig hegemony, stimulating a dynamic opposition press. From the 1720s, domestic politics came to be dominated by Robert Walpole, who quickly turned to the press in order to strengthen his political position as leader of the Whig government. In the summer of 1722, Walpole 'staked his political career' on exposing Bishop Francis Atterbury's role in a Jacobite plot, which saw the prelate arrested, and confined to the Tower on charges of treason.¹⁹ Against this backdrop, Walpole directed the purchase of the successful Whig newspaper, the *London Journal*, and installed new editors and contributors to create a quasi-governmental publication. These contributors included the Low Church Bishop Benjamin Hoadly, who pressed for the public exposure of Atterbury in the *London Journal* in order to counter claims of Tory newspapers such as the *True Briton*.²⁰ The strident support for the ministry displayed in the *London Journal* attracted the ire of High Church readers among the clergy, such as Robert Marsden, Archdeacon of Nottingham, who suspected that it was managed by 'a Deist'.²¹

¹⁵ Jeremy Black, *The English Press*, p. 8.

¹⁶ R. M. Wiles, *Freshest Advices, Early Provincial Newspapers in England* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1965), p. 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 5–6

¹⁸ Jeremy Black, *The English Press*, p. 26.

¹⁹ G. V. Bennett, *The Tory Crisis in Church and State, 1688–1730. The Career of Francis Atterbury, Bishop of Rochester* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 258.

²⁰ William Gibson, *Enlightenment Prelate: Benjamin Hoadly, 1676–1761* (Cambridge: James Clark & Co, 2009), pp. 207–211.

²¹ Nottinghamshire Archives. DD/TS/14/2, commonplace book [of Robert Marsden], 1724–1735.

Despite these efforts to influence print news, the opposition press against Walpole led by the *Country Journal, or Craftsman* decried the government and the chief minister throughout the 1720s and 1730s. In the final years covered by the Nichols collection, Walpole faced particular criticism in response to his handling of the Excise Crisis of 1733–1734, and the Quaker Tithe Bill of 1736. Prior to this latter episode, Walpole had been temporarily bolstered in the public domain by the 1735 removal to France of Lord Bolingbroke, contributor to the *Craftsman* and one of the ministry's most able critics.²² With this great adversary out of the picture, Walpole turned his attention to dividing his political opponents, but attempts to grant concessions to dissenters were unexpectedly met with hostility from his allies in the Church. This eventually led to a rupture between the chief minister and his leading ecclesiastical advisor, Bishop Edmund Gibson, breaking a Church-Whig alliance that had been maintained for over a decade.²³

Conclusion

The Nichols collection provides an unprecedented insight into a period in which the metropolitan newspaper trade in Britain was transformed. In the seventeenth century, the Stuart monarchs aimed to suppress potential sedition through restrictive regulation of the press, but their ability to do so effectively was greatly challenged during periods of political and religious instability. The removal in 1695 of many of the legal impediments to the expansion of the newspaper trade led to several innovations, including daily and evening news in London, titles issued out from the capital to country audiences, and the eventual emergence of provincial newspaper enterprises throughout Britain. The development of this diversified marketplace for print news outside direct governmental control coincided with a period of trenchant two-party politics under Queen Anne, in which newspapers were readily utilised to provide sustained accounts of ongoing public debates. Following the accession of George I in 1714, and the diminution of Tory political influence, the regulation of the press increasingly served the purpose of suppressing Jacobite views; a further incarnation of attempts to ward against the political threat of Catholicism in Britain, which remained a potent backdrop to public affairs throughout this period.

²² Philip Connell, *Secular Chains, Poetry and the Politics of Religion from Milton to Pope* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 229–231.

²³ N. C. Hunt, *Two Early Political Associations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 92–99; Stephen Taylor, 'Sir Robert Walpole, The Church of England, and the Quaker Tithe Bill of 1736', in *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (March 1985), pp. 51–77; Robert G. Ingram, *Religion, Reform, and Modernity in the Eighteenth Century, Thomas Secker and the Church of England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2007), pp. 196–199.