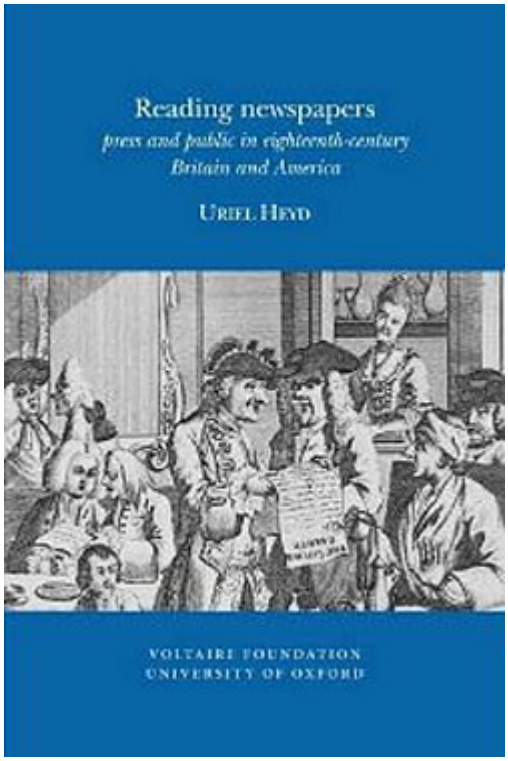
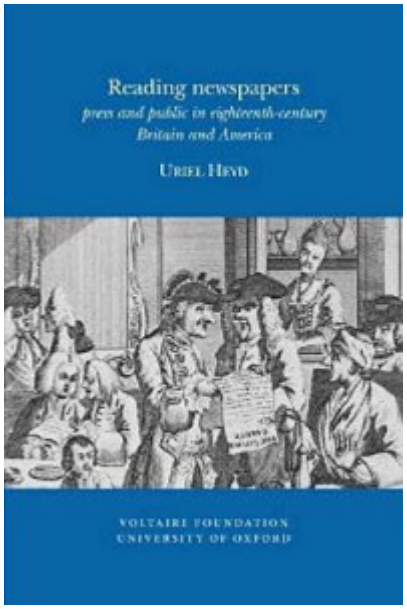
A Transatlantic Culture of News?



Historians of newspapers and the media in colonial North America often encounter the same two general questions at the end of a presentation or talk: “But what did readers think?” and “But did the same thing happen in Britain?” For the latter query, scholars of print culture have developed a range of answers over the past two decades by examining the eighteenth century through an Atlantic lens. As for readers, the answer is in some ways the Holy Grail of journalism research. We have decent estimates for how many people may have read each copy of a newspaper (in North America, as many as four or five), but much of what readers thought as they read is lost to the air; that is, people discussed the news in taverns or coffee houses but never committed their thoughts to writing. What readers did preserve is scattered throughout the historical record, making it difficult to design a feasible research project. Most scholars have therefore elided the question or stipulated to broad readership based on indirect evidence. Understanding how readers interpreted the newspaper and what cultural work newspapers did therefore remain vital questions to explore.



Uriel Heyd, Reading Newspapers: Press and Public in Eighteenth-Century Britain and America, SVEC 2012:03. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2012. 302 pp., $105.

Uriel Heyd offers a comparative approach to the culture surrounding the press in the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world in his new study,*Reading Newspapers*. He employs a hybrid methodology, aiming for comprehension across space and time through the selection of representative examples. On the British side, Heyd directs the bulk of his attention to the bustling London print market, with supplemental evidence drawn largely from Edinburgh. In North America and the United States, Heyd's evidence is necessarily more diffused across the continent, as the printing trade was far less centralized.

For both sides of the story, Heyd uses the material in newspapers themselves, especially the "manifestos" that often accompanied the first appearance of a publication and the printer's copy of the 1752 run of the *Edinburgh Evening Courant*. At the same time, he also searches beyond the newspaper for sources that talk *about* newspaper reading, including plays, indexes, and book auction catalogues. In particular, Heyd makes significant use of the newspaper collection of Harbottle Dorr, the colonial Boston shopkeeper who annotated and saved his newspapers for the period from 1765 to 1776. Drawing on this eclectic range of sources, Heyd concludes that "the eighteenth-century newspaper was an active agent influencing in varying degrees a wide range of spheres in life: from commerce to politics, from culture to society, from the private to the public" (27).

Heyd structures his argument around two interrelated issues: how newspapers presented themselves to the world, and how the world in turn saw them. Printers and editors were often clear about what they wanted readers to take from their publications. In the first number of publications, in fact, most published brief notes—Heyd refers to them as "manifestos"—which allowed them to explain their motivations and declare their intentions for their publication. These statements of purpose, Heyd explains, show that printers and editors aimed to make their newspapers "useful and entertaining," to circulate news and

political debate, to support commerce both locally and on a broader scale, and to facilitate “community formation and interaction” (61). These noble goals notwithstanding, newspapers were also consumer goods, and their publishers paid careful attention to “branding” and other marketing strategies in a burgeoning capitalist market for news in the eighteenth century (though more true in London than in the colonies). Newspapers also covered a broad array of topics, as Heyd demonstrates graphically in the book’s third chapter. Here as elsewhere Heyd relies largely on the printer’s characterizations through the indexes compiled for bound editions of their newspapers.

If newspaper producers had aspirations to grandeur in their self-presentation, readers took a somewhat dimmer view. On stage, in fact, playwrights depicted the London press as “concerned with fiction rather than with factual truth” (163). At the same time, dramatists recognized the cultural power of news as depicted in the stock character known as Quidnunc (from the Latin for “What now?”), who “represented the avid, even addicted, newspaper consumer, completely engulfed by politics” (195). The character, Heyd writes, “displays a one-track mind that cannot deal with personal events and prefers escaping from personal crisis to faraway reported worlds, whether real or unreal” (201). In other words, if you encountered this review first as a link on Facebook or Twitter, you probably know a modern-day Quidnunc. Most importantly, the Quidnunc character reveals the leveling effect of the news. Anyone with literacy could become a follower of government decisions, military campaigns, and the like. Even after the news was no longer proximately useful, Heyd points out, readers still clamored for bound collections as a means of preserving the historical moment and providing a “medium-term” perspective on the past.

Much of Heyd’s interest appears to lay in broadening the evidence base for the history of news beyond the texts of the newspapers themselves. It is particularly heartening as a fellow traveler in journalism history to see the collection of Harbottle Dorr put into service as evidence of reader response. Dorr and his newspapers are certainly well known. The collection is held in four volumes at the Massachusetts Historical Society, and noted historians Bernard Bailyn and Thomas C. Leonard have discussed Dorr’s life and annotations. Yet few scholars have attempted to integrate Dorr’s annotations into arguments about news and media culture, both because he is simply one observer and because the task of reading not only a decade’s worth of newspapers but also copious notes is a monumental task. For this alone Heyd is to be commended. Many newspapers contain some annotation on them, usually the name of the subscriber, and occasionally a printer’s mark (especially on those in the collections at the American Antiquarian Society and the Library Company of Philadelphia, two of the largest early American newspaper collectors in the United States). But there is no resource quite like Dorr’s extended marginal meditations on the ideology and mobilization behind the American Revolution, taken down as events unfolded (and years later) in the newspapers of Boston, that hotbed of radicalism.

On the other hand, *Reading Newspapers* leaves open several interpretive issues.

Most importantly, the comparison between London and North America, while in principle a necessary corrective, often works rather awkwardly. In many respects, that is, it seems unfair to ask colonial American newspapers to stand side by side with those of London because of the vast difference in scale. Newspaper printers in colonial America and the early United States were frequently the sole operators in their towns, who struggled to cobble together enough work to survive. Eighteenth-century London, by contrast, boasted a viciously competitive marketplace for news, as Heyd shows. The area of Britain that looked more like the colonies was the provinces. Scholars of the book trade, in fact, have made significant inroads in comparing towns and cities from the British periphery, including places such as Bristol, Edinburgh, Dublin, and Philadelphia, to name just a few. Further accounts, based either on archival research or a synthesis of scholarly work, should prove helpful in more fully elucidating the nature of news culture in the British Atlantic world by bringing in a broader spectrum of that culture.

Understanding the culture of news remains an elusive pursuit. *Reading Newspapers* at once demonstrates that seeking answers through a comparative approach can bear fruit and that historians still have much work to do in thinking about news production, distribution, and consumption in a transatlantic context. Opening the door to these questions, even as some of Heyd's answers frustrate, is ultimately a useful contribution.

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