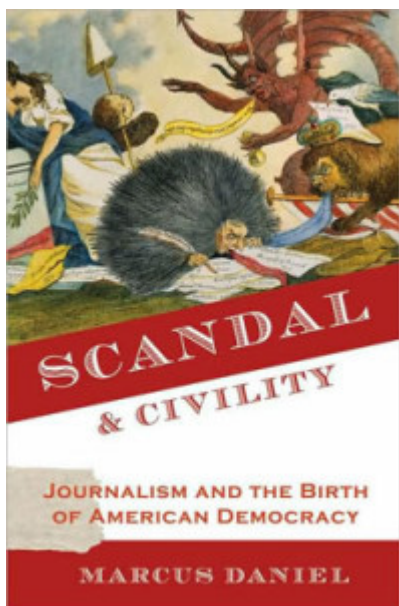
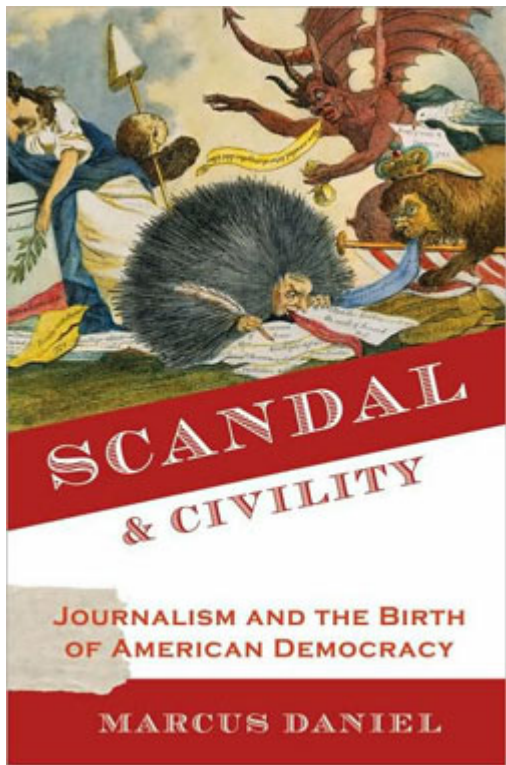


# Newspapers and the Cant of Civility



Marcus Daniel, *Scandal and Civility: Journalism and the Birth of American Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 386 pp., hardcover, \$28.00.

You do not need to read a newspaper to know that the newspaper industry is presently in a state of crisis. As major metropolitan dailies abandon their print editions, cut staff, scale back content, and tumble into Chapter 11, we are increasingly warned that newspapers must be saved in the name of democracy. Without the objective reporting they provide, citizens will become less informed, the electorate will grow more polarized, political corruption and

corporate malfeasance will flourish, and public discourse will sink further into the mire of rumor mongering and partisan ranting found on cable news networks and the Internet. In this regard, calls to “save the newspaper, save democracy” seek not only to rescue a medium but to defend a particular mode of professional journalism taught in universities and codified in the prim language of the AP stylebook.

A book entitled *Scandal and Civility: Journalism and the Birth of American Democracy* might appear to offer a timely perspective on this crisis. But the title is slightly misleading: the democracy birthed here is somewhat premature. And Marcus Daniel is too careful a historian to provide any talking points for those who lament (or, for that matter, cheer) the death rattles of the newspaper. Revisiting the “paper wars” of the 1790s by examining the lives of six prominent editorial combatants (Federalists John Fenno, Noah Webster, and William Cobbett, and Republicans Philip Freneau, Benjamin Franklin Bache, and William Duane), Daniel contends that “the political journalism of the 1790s helped to connect citizens to the new nation-state and to create a more democratic and participatory public culture.” But it did so by violating most every available standard of editorial conduct and by flouting established norms of civility, deference, and decorum (16). As they insulted and scandalized politicians (and each other) before a growing reading public, newspaper editors challenged the traditional belief that political discussion was best left to prominent and refined gentlemen.

This sort of behavior—particularly the practice of casting aspersions on the private character of public men—led previous generations of journalism historians to conclude that the early republic was a “dark age of partisan journalism” wherein newspapers offered little news, and editors took orders from party leaders, who regarded newspapers as mere instruments of propaganda—which, presumably, readers swallowed uncritically. Beneath this interpretation lurks a teleological assumption that newspapers have but one true destiny: to become politically independent commercial enterprises that supply the public with professionally reported news and balanced opinion. For more than thirty years, proponents of a “new” journalism history have assailed the dark-age thesis as a legitimating myth of professional journalism. Emphasizing the historicity of “news,” they have found plenty of it in early national newspapers. With an assist from the “new” political and cultural histories, they have shown that parties were less regimented than previously imagined, that newspaper editors were more likely to be party leaders than lickspittles, and that readers took their papers with a dose of skepticism.

Echoing this scholarship, *Scandal and Civility* quickly dispenses with the dark-age myth and turns its sights instead to the more enduring myth of the Founding Fathers. In this version of events, newspapers appear as platforms for the anonymous essays of Madison, Adams, and Hamilton, and their editors are depicted as little more than political clients and ideological ciphers. Daniel’s finely drawn and sympathetic portraits of Fenno, Freneau, Bache, Webster, Cobbett, and Duane, who managed to edit their newspapers with

considerable degrees of independence, suggest otherwise. Indeed, Daniel aims to rescue them “from the condescension of both their own time and posterity and restore them to their rightful place in the politics of the early Republic: center stage” (6). This is no mean ambition. And while readers may remain unconvinced that Fenno or Duane should share the spotlight with Thomas Jefferson, this book makes it abundantly clear that they were not bit players.

Daniel believes that the editors of the 1790s are best understood as “men of ideas” equipped with an “almost limitless faith in the influence of the press” (30). He is not especially concerned with the quotidian business of editing, publishing, and circulating a newspaper. The role of editors in party organization and electioneering is acknowledged but not explored in much detail, and the economic conditions and public policies (the Post Office Act of 1792, for example) that allowed newspapers to flourish are passed over in silence. Daniel instead focuses on the distinctive rhetorical strategies of his journalists, and the specific political contexts in which they were developed and deployed. The result is a narrative that revisits the familiar partisan controversies of the 1790s—the debate over Hamilton’s finance system, the Genet mission, the Whisky Rebellion, the XYZ affair, etc.—from the perspective of six prominent controversialists. In less skilled hands, such an approach would tend to exaggerate the severity, incivility, and partisanship of the Federalist era. But Daniel is careful to emphasize the contingency and fluidity of partisan divisions and to show how this could both inflame *and* moderate journalistic rhetoric.

Put another way, the “paper wars” of the 1790s were not fought by political elites and their ink-stained mercenaries on clearly marked ideological terrain: the maps were sketchy, the rules of engagement unclear, and the weapons often backfired. For example, *Scandal and Civility* opens with a biography of the much-neglected John Fenno, whose *Gazette of the United States* is commonly described as a partisan organ of the Washington administration. But Daniel shows that Fenno was a rather hesitant and unreliable partisan. His reluctance to take sides in the rivalries between Hamilton, Adams, and Jefferson impelled the latter to patronize the more “Republican” newspapers of Philip Freneau and Benjamin Franklin Bache. As party feelings intensified, Fenno was less inclined to attack the opposition than pen panegyrics to the nonpartisan character of Washington.



John Fenno's *Gazette of the United States*, which is often cast as the mouthpiece of Washington's administration and its Federalist allies, may have been less partisan than scholars have realized (1790). Courtesy of the U.S. Census Bureau Website.

Daniel's portraits of Freneau and Bache reveal a comparable hesitancy and ambivalence in the face of partisan battle. The former preferred poetry to newspapers and spent much of his brief career at the *National Gazette* casting around for an effective rhetoric of opposition. Taking a page from Paine's *Rights of Man*, he learned to assail Federalists as the party of "aristocracy." But his unwavering support for the French Revolution and Edmond Genet soon cost him the vital support of Jefferson. Daniel's chapter on Bache and the Philadelphia *Aurora* tells a similar story. The favorite grandson of Benjamin Franklin is usually remembered for his bold attacks on President Washington. But if Bache viewed the reverence bestowed on Washington as anti-republican, he did not say so until opposition to the Jay Treaty exposed cracks in the president's popularity. And if his use of antimonarchical rhetoric against Washington helped to "desacralize" the presidency, it did collateral damage to the political fortunes of the Republican opposition—something Bache himself seemed to realize.

American responses to the French Revolution and the writings of Thomas Paine play a pivotal role in Daniel's narrative. His portrait of Noah Webster and the *American Minerva* provides a case study in how enthusiasm for French republicanism and *Rights of Man* could turn into anti-Jacobinism and revulsion for *The Age of Reason*. But this is also the weakest chapter in the book: Webster's peculiar and theoretical cast of mind was not well suited to journalism, and his pretensions to owl-like wisdom made him a frequent target of abuse—even from fellow Federalists like William Cobbett, the subject of Daniel's liveliest chapter. Staunchly British, unremittingly coarse, and unstinting in his hatred of Jacobins and democrats, Cobbett was also one of the most widely read journalists of the 1790s. His *Porcupine's Gazette*, first

issued in 1797, gleefully mocked standard professions of editorial impartiality. But his success would be short-lived. Cobbett soon came to symbolize “the political degeneracy and disorder that many Americans believed had engulfed public life” (190). By the summer of 1800, a barrage of libel suits orchestrated by Pennsylvania Republicans forced him to flee the country he so despised.

The Federalist response to licentious newspapers and their editors—the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798—is well known, and *Scandal and Civility* closes with its most effective Republican critic, William Duane, Bache’s successor at the *Aurora*. Duane’s critique had less to do with libertarian principles than partisan spin: the acts allowed him to unmask Federalists as the true party of Jacobin misrule and position Democratic-Republicans as champions of law and order. But to execute this rhetorical volte-face, he disowned his Paineite radicalism and deism, decried the incivility of the (Federalist) press, and vouched for the sincere Christian beliefs of Thomas Jefferson. If the Jeffersonians of 1800 restored the political principles of 1776, they did so by accommodating a more conservative public mood. The result, Daniel concludes, was a “more organizationally disciplined, less ideologically creative, and in many ways less democratic and open political culture” (283).

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