Stuart Monarchy and the Invention of News

Professor Andrew McRae in conversation with Dr Joseph Hone

www.stuarts-online.com

Andrew McRae: I'm with Dr Joseph Hone in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, and we're thinking in this film about news. One of the great developments of the seventeenth century was the development of news. And we're looking here at one of two newspapers that was launched in a single month in December 1688: the *London Courant*. Joe, can you tell us little bit about why these papers will be launched this particular month?

Joseph Hone: Well December 1688 has to be one of the most uncertain months of the later seventeenth century. William of Orange had landed in Torbay. James II was in the process of leaving the country. The polity was anxious. And there was a great demand for reliable intelligence. Nobody knew quite what was going on, so it was imperative that they could read about the events of the day. Hence this newspaper opens by observing, and I quote, 'the greater the itch of curiosity after news hath been here of late, the less has the humour been gratified'. So what the editor of this newspaper is saying is that the more people want news, the less they can get reliable news. And this paper was ostensibly launched to fill that vacuum, to provide reliable news of current events.

AMcR: So thinking about the way in which news writers rush to fill a vacuum of demand for news in this particular month highlights one of the great and lasting revolutions of the seventeenth century: an information revolution. At the beginning of the century there were no newspapers. By the end of the century there were many competing newspapers. Two launched in one month, offering different perspective on events. And these were discussed openly in coffee houses and other public venues. And thinking about this development can help us understand major changes in the nature of political engagement across the seventh century.

JH: Okay. So looking back, perhaps we should begin by asking why were there no newspapers at the beginning of the century? It seems like an obvious thing to start printing once there's the technology.

AMcR: The key point here is that the printing of news, of domestic political events, was banned at the start of the seventeenth century. And there were important reasons for this. The crown (and James I is key here) didn't want subject across the country discussing or debating politics. James himself was particularly committed to the idea that some matters of state were beyond the understanding of ordinary people. He was also committed the idea, and this was the dominant political theory of the time, that Parliament was there merely to advise the monarch. So there's no real point about debating issues beyond Parliament. They were just there to advise the monarch: no need for news at all.

JH: Okay, so how and when did that change?

AMcR: I think this was changing really by the time that James came in. These theories of government, as much as people like James were committed to them, were under great strain. And this was evident in the appetite for news. So what we find, even at a time when the printing of domestic news was officially banned, we find all sorts of manuscript newsletters being circulated. People writing down, scribbling down, and rewriting and circulating across the country, reports of what was going on in parliament. And people were allowed to print news from the continent. So the continental wars of religion, the Thirty Years' War in the early seventeenth century, were avidly followed month by month in England. And there was a great exchange of news also orally, especially in London. People would meet each other and say 'what's the news', and exchange news, gossip, scandal in the way that newspapers would eventually take over and do.

JH: So if a monarch such as James I was responsible for enforcing this kind of censorship, then surely when the monarchy comes strain in the 1640s this all begins to change? Does censorship collapse?

AMcR: Yes. I mean, the English newspaper was effectively born in the 1640s. We have the previous sense of momentum towards it, looking at manuscript sources, looking at printing of continental news. But really what we get in the 1640s, when censorship breaks down, is an explosion of news writing, of printed news about British political events. And these newsbooks were usually also quite partisan in nature, supporting one side or the other. And various events went on, and as the king lost power and Parliament took over in and when we move on to the 1660s and things switch the other way, we find particular news writers switching from one side of [to] the other, simply to stay in business. As one key figure, a man called Marchamont Nedham, notoriously switched from one side to the other and back again.

JH: So it made sound business sense, as it were, to turn tail, and suddenly side with the regime in power.

AMcR: Well that was his business to some extent! People were torn in these years between business interests and ideological interests.

JH: So with that in mind, what happened in 1660 with the Restoration?

AMcR: It seems that people in 1660 actually weren't at all sure what would happen to news. There was a sense that you pick up in some commentary that the people saw news writing as almost a product of the civil wars; so once the wars are over, there's no need to write about…

JH: There's nothing to report!

AMcR: Nothing to report, exactly. And yet, clearly looking back news had become an entrenched part of a changing political system.

JH: Yeah, but I'm not sure it's actually as simple as that might suggest, because we've got to remember that the news industry still faced draconian laws of censorship after the Restoration. There was the Surveyor of the Press, who was in charge of licensing these productions: an infamous royalist called Roger L'Estrange. He had to enforce the newly established Licensing Act. All newspapers needed to be approved by L'Estrange before they could be printed.

AMcR: So this is a moment, therefore, when the nature of news is changing yet again, changing to a realm of censorship—existing, but changing shape.

JH: Yeah. Exactly. And another thing that restricted the press was geography. Printing was strictly restricted to key locations in London, Oxford, Exeter and a few other places. There was no real provincial press. So the *London Gazette* was the key official news organ of the

government. And sophisticated distribution networks ensured that this paper and quite a lot of other government propaganda was distributed across the country. So in some ways perhaps the nation was unified by access to news. But it was purely a version of current affairs that was endorsed and sanctioned by the government. They can only get hold of official news from London, unless they had a friend bringing back some unofficial party newspapers. So that's an interesting development to consider.

AMcR: And then how do things change as time goes on, and as party politics starts to take shape? What's the relation then between news and the development of parties?

JH: Well we know today that newspapers are partisan. You get papers that endorse particular political ideologies and it was exactly the same in the late 1670s when Parliament first fractured into parties with the Tories supporting the Stuart establishment and the Whigs supporting proposals to exclude James, the Catholic Duke of York, from the line of succession. And so here we had newspapers emerging in support of either faction: not necessarily official newspapers, not necessarily newspapers that were licensed. So we had illegal news, in some ways. But it wasn't really until 1694 that the link between the press and party politics became so clear, when we had two things happen almost simultaneously. First, the Licensing Act, the primary government instrument of censorship lapsed. Sudden you didn’t have to pass things by Roger L’Estrange before you could get them printed. You printed them, and, if the government took offence, then you could be prosecuted later on. But it was still out in the open. Second, and in the same year the new Triennial Act ensured that general elections had to be held at least every three years. So all of a sudden party politics becomes entrenched. The electoral system is far quicker, there is a much greater turnaround of MPs, and all of a sudden newspapers are not just a vehicle for disseminating news. They’ve become a vehicle for electioneering propaganda.

AMcR: So we’re getting a sense of the ways in which the development of newspapers was moving through different phases, partly influenced by the development of censorship or the shifts in in practices of censorship. What’s happening in what we might call that the final phase of the seventeenth century, when we move into the 1690s even into the 1700s.

JH: Well really we get a press that is entirely partisan. You get papers that are entirely supportive of the Whigs: papers such as *The Observator* and *The Review*, and on the other hand we get Tory papers such as *The Post Boy*, *The Rehearsal*. There's even Jacobite papers such as *Mist’s Weekly Journal*. These are papers where the editors get prosecuted quite frequently by the government for saying some quite seditious things. But people do it anyway. I think we can take two things away from that. One, it was immensely profitable to say these scandalous things. Occasionally you'd end up in jail, but people wanted to read it and these newspapers sold. But on the other hand, we sort of have to assume that these newspaper editors and reporters and journalists had some ideological commitment to their causes. After all most people wouldn’t be willing to risk imprisonment just for a bit of cash. There would have to be some ideological drive, and that's really what drives the press all through the 1690s and early 1700s. So newspapers weren't just driven by money. They were also driven by partisan ideology.

AMcR: So this helps us to understand the idea of a ‘public sphere’. Something that historians have talked about a lot in the last couple of decades is the idea that this concept of a ‘public sphere’ took shape certainly in the latter half of the seventeenth century (some people might say earlier) that the idea of a public sphere is a socially inclusive realm which facilitates the free

exchange of ideas and opinions in a manner that is governed by principles of reason and rational debate about politics. And we look at coffeehouses, for example, as key sites for these debates: sites in which people were reading newspapers, debating newspapers, and in turn influencing politics.

JH: So why coffeehouses, do you think Andrew? And why not taverns, necessarily, that are becoming the site of the public sphere? What is it that makes the coffeehouse special?

AMcR: There's something about the coffeehouse and the metropolis, I think. The idea of the coffeehouse is something new, something modern, and it just created a culture of political debate that was quite distinct from the kind of culture that we find in taverns, although you do have people debating politics and in taverns in different ways, right throughout the period, of course. But maybe it produces a somewhat more sober debate about the news.

JH: Even with that said, though, debate in coffeehouses could get quite heated. We've got an engraving here from the early eighteenth century called *The Coffeehouse Mob*, in which some men reading newspapers flinging coffee on one another, clearly because they're disagreeing about interpretations of the news of the day. So you're absolutely correct, I think, in that the coffeehouse, like you say, was a sober place in which to debate the news. That doesn't mean that it was a dull place. And actually the public spare was subject to government crackdowns as well. In 1675 Charles II tried to shut down the coffeehouses because he feared they'd become a hotbed of sedition. This was a place in which seditious principles were debated. But his attempt was unsuccessful, so popular was the coffeehouse to prove. In 1712, when the partisan press was at its most fierce (and probably round the time this engraving was made), Queen Anne imposed what's known as the Stamp Tax on newspapers. And this was a tax that increased the price of newspapers with the intention, the deliberate intention, of decreasing their readership. So this was a clever move to stem the flow of radical opinions. Likewise, as I mentioned earlier, newspaper editors could be subject to prosecution for seditious libel. So the government didn't always look favourably on the public sphere, even though it was a rational place to debate politics.

AMcR: And so we can see in the history of news a kind of tension, can't we: between on one hand the whole drive towards bringing more people into political debate, using newspapers and the spread of news as a kind of democratising force; and yet on the other hand we see governments and monarchs right across the period very anxious about that expansion of political engagement. And perhaps we could say that that very tension has never been resolved and remains in the news business today.

Bodleian items featured (by shelfmark): Nicholson Newspapers; Wood 522; Antic. E. E. 96; Ashmole 830.