

# THE NEW YORKER

A CRITIC AT LARGE

## BACK ISSUES

*The day the newspaper died.*

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The newspaper is dead. You can read all about it online, blog by blog, where the digital gloom over the death of an industry often veils, if thinly, a pallid glee. The Newspaper Death Watch, a Web site, even has a column titled “R.I.P.” Or, hold on, maybe the newspaper isn’t quite dead yet. At its funeral, wild-eyed mourners spy signs of life. The newspaper stirs!

The last time the American newspaper business got this gothic was 1765, just after the first gothic novel, Horace Walpole’s “The Castle of Otranto,” was published, in London, and, in an unrelated development, Parliament decided to levy on the colonies a new tax, requiring government-issued stamps on pages of printed paper—everything from indenture agreements to bills of credit to playing cards. The tax hit printers hard, at a time when printers were also the editors of newspapers, and sometimes their chief writers, too. The Stamp Act—the “fatal *Black-Act*,” one printer called it—was set to go into effect on November 1, 1765. Beginning that day, printers were to affix stamps to their pages and to pay tax collectors a halfpenny for every half sheet—amounting, ordinarily, to a penny for every copy of every issue of every newspaper—and a two-shilling tax on every advertisement. Printers insisted that they could not bear this cost. It would spell the death of the newspaper.

On October 10, 1765, an Annapolis printer changed his newspaper’s title to the *Maryland Gazette, Expiring*. Its motto: “In uncertain Hopes of a Resurrection to Life again.” Later that month, the printer of the *Pennsylvania Journal* replaced his newspaper’s masthead with a death’s-head and framed his



*Colonial newspapers, burdened by a new tax, floridly staged their demise. Liberty, they warned, would perish with them.*

front page with a thick black border in the shape of a gravestone. “Adieu, Adieu,” the *Journal* whispered. On October 31st, the *New-Hampshire Gazette* appeared with black mourning borders and, in a column on page 1, lamented its own demise: “I must Die!” The *Connecticut Courant* quoted the book of Samuel: “Tell it not in Gath! publish it not in Askalon!” The newspaper is dead!

Or, then as now, not quite dead yet. “Before I make my Exit,” the *New-Hampshire Gazette* told its readers, “I will recount over some of the many good Deeds I have done, and how useful I have been, and still may be, provided my Life should be spar’d; or I might hereafter revive again.” The list of deeds ran to three columns. Nothing good in the world had ever happened but that a printer set it in type. “Without this Art of communicating to the Public, how dull and melancholy must all the intelligent Part of Mankind appear?” But, besides the settling over the land of a pall of dullness and melancholy, what else happens when a newspaper dies? In one allegory published during the Stamp Act crisis, a tearful LIBERTY cries to her dying brother, GAZETTE, “Unless thou revivest quickly, I shall also perish with thee! In our Lives we were not divided; in our Deaths we shall not be separated!”

In the eighteenth century, the death of a newspaper signalled the death of liberty. What it signals now is harder to know, especially because there’s death, and then there’s death. If, one day, ink-and-print is dead and gone, newspapers will endure, wraiths of ether. The newspaper didn’t stay dead in the age of the American Revolution, either. Soon enough, it rose from its inky grave. Two months after that first Annapolis paper expired, a New York newspaper reported a sighting: “The APPARITION of the late Maryland Gazette, which is not Dead, but only Sleeping.”

That ghost story—the fate of the undead newspaper in Revolutionary America—bears telling. Maybe if we knew more about the founding hacks, we’d have a better idea of what we will have lost when the last newspaper rolls off the presses. If the newspaper, at least as a thing printed on paper and delivered to your door, has a doomsday, it may be coming soon. Not so soon as weeks or months, but not so far off as decades, either. The end, apparently, really is near. That makes this a good time to ask: what was the beginning about?

**N**ewspapers date to the sixteenth century; they started as newsletters and news books, sometimes printed, sometimes copied by hand, and sent from one place to another, carrying word of trade and politics. The word “newspaper” didn’t enter the English language until the sixteen-sixties. Venetians sold news for a coin called a gazzetta. The Germans read *Zeitungen*; the French *nouvelles*; the English intelligencers. The *London Gazette* began in 1665. Its news was mostly old, foreign, and unreliable.

Because early newspapers tended to take aim at people in power, they were sometimes called “paper bullets.” Newspapers have long done battle with the church and the state while courting the

market. This game can get dangerous. The first newspaper in the British American colonies, *Publick Occurrences*, printed in Boston in 1690, was shut down after just one issue for reporting, among other things, that the king of France had cuckolded his own son. Propping up power is, generally, a less dodgy proposition than defying it. The *Boston News-Letter*, “published by authority”—endorsed by ecclesiastics—lasted from 1704 till 1776. In 1719, two more Colonial papers began printing: the *Boston Gazette* and, out of Philadelphia, the *American Weekly Mercury*. (Nearly every early American newspaper was issued weekly; it took sixteen hours to set the type for a standard four-page paper.) But James Franklin’s *New-England Courant*, launched in 1721, in Boston, marks the real birth of the American newspaper. It was the first unlicensed paper in the colonies—published without authority—and, while it lasted, it was also, by far, the best. The *Courant* contained political essays, opinion, satire, and some word of goings on. Franklin was the first newspaperman in the world to report the results of a legislative vote count. The *Boston News-Letter* contained, besides the shipping news, tiresome government pronouncements, letters from Europe, and whatever smattering of local news was bland enough to pass the censor. Franklin had a different editorial policy: “I hereby invite all Men, who have Leisure, Inclination and Ability, to speak their Minds with Freedom, Sense and Moderation, and their Pieces shall be welcome to a Place in my Paper.”

Not long after Franklin started printing the *Courant*, he hired his little brother as an apprentice. Decades later, when an aging Benjamin Franklin wrote his autobiography, he painted his brother James as a brute, in order to make his own Hogarthian story, the apprentice’s progress, a metaphor for the colonists’ growing irritation with parliamentary rule. James’s “harsh and tyrannical Treatment,” Franklin wrote, had served as “a means of impressing me with that Aversion to arbitrary Power that has stuck to me thro’ my whole Life.” Franklin ran away. He might have titled this chapter of his autobiography “Wherein the Bridling Apprentice Pursues His Independence.” It is just the kind of story that clever people tell about their lives: meaningful, useful, and, quite possibly, not altogether true.

Whether or not James Franklin was a hard master, he was, as a printer, bold unto recklessness. He set as his task the toppling of the Puritan theocracy, and nearly managed it. A fuming Cotton Mather dubbed Franklin and his writers the Hell-Fire Club and called his newspaper “A Wickedness never parallel’d any where upon the Face of the Earth!” Undeterred—more likely, spurred on—Franklin printed, in the pages of his paper, essay after essay about the freedom of the press. “To anathematize a Printer for publishing the different Opinions of Men is as injudicious as it is wicked,” the *Courant* argued. For this, and much more—and especially for printing a profile of Mather, an “Essay against Hypocrites”—Franklin was thrown in jail, twice. In 1723, a legislative committee charged with investigating the *Courant* reported, “The Tendency of the Said paper is to Mock Religion, & bring it

into Contempt, That the Holy Scriptures are therein profanely abused, that the Reverend and faithful Ministers of the Gospell are injuriously Reflected on, His Majesties Government affronted, and the peace and good Order of his Majesties Subjects of this Province disturbed.” Authorities ordered Franklin to submit the *Courant* to review or stop printing it. But no one said that someone else couldn’t print it. A notice in the next issue claimed that the paper was “Printed and Sold by BENJAMIN FRANKLIN in Queen Street.” As Benjamin Franklin later fondly recalled, “I had the Management of the Paper, and I made bold to give our Rulers some Rubs in it.”

Giving their rulers some rubs was what eighteenth-century printers did best, as Marcus Daniel recounts in “Scandal & Civility: Journalism and the Birth of American Democracy” (Oxford; \$28). Standards of journalistic objectivity date to the nineteenth century. Before then, the whole point was to have a point of view. “The Business of Printing has chiefly to do with Men’s Opinions,” Benjamin Franklin wrote, in his “Apology for Printers,” in 1731, after he started printing the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, in Philadelphia. (Franklin proposed printing a one-size-fits-all “Apology” annually, to save himself the labor of apologizing every time he offended someone.) Franklin’s job, as he saw it, wasn’t to find out facts. It was to publish a sufficient range of opinion: “Printers are educated in the Belief, that when Men differ in Opinion, both Sides ought equally to have the Advantage of being heard by the Publick; and that when Truth and Error have fair Play, the former is always an overmatch for the latter.”

Often, truth did out. In 1735, John Peter Zenger, the German-immigrant printer of the *New-York Weekly Journal*, was jailed for seditious libel for printing essays pointing out that New York’s governor, William Cosby, was an avaricious scoundrel. (Zenger didn’t write those essays; he just printed them.) Zenger’s dazzling lawyer, Andrew Hamilton, managed to get the printer acquitted by arguing that what Zenger printed was true—Cosby really was a blackguard—even though truth, before the Zenger case, had never been allowed as a defense against libel.

Boston’s Benjamin Edes gave his rulers some rubs, too. In 1755, Edes, with his lacklustre partner, John Gill, took over the failing Boston *Gazette*. The son of a Charlestown hatter, Edes was not a man of means. He was once City Scavenger. Two years after Edes started printing the *Gazette*, Boston’s selectmen scolded him: “you have printed Such Pamphlets & such things in your News Papers as reflect grossly upon the received religious principles of this People which is very Offensive . . . we therefore now Inform you if you go on printing things of this Nature you must Expect no more favours from Us.” Edes could have done with Franklin’s handy-dandy “Apology.” Instead, he was left to issue a vague and impossible promise that he would in the future “publish nothing that shall give any uneasiness to any Persons whatever.”

What would the point of that have been? Edes didn't stop. In the seventeen-sixties, his *Boston Gazette*, once the scourge of pious selectmen, became the organ of the patriot opposition. John and Samuel Adams, James Otis, Jr., Joseph Warren—Boston's self-styled Sons of Liberty—all wrote for Edes's paper; Paul Revere engraved its masthead. Edes wrote for the *Gazette*, too, though his prose flickered but dimly. But Edes, like all his writers, knew how to sling mud, especially at royally appointed governors, British soldiers, and tax collectors. Tory printers took to calling the *Gazette* the "Weekly Dung Barge."

This charge wasn't entirely without foundation. Early American newspapers tend to look like one long and uninterrupted invective, a ragged fleet of dung barges. In a way, they were. Plenty of that nose thumbing was mere gimmickry and gambolling. Some of it was capricious, and much of it was just plain malicious. But much of it was more. All that invective, taken together, really does add up to a long and revolutionary argument against tyranny, against arbitrary authority—against, that is, the rule of men above law.

There were twenty-two newspapers in the thirteen colonies in 1764, the year that Parliament passed the Sugar Act, a duty on certain imports, and warned colonists that a stamp tax would soon follow. Very many colonists were already broke, peeved, and even grieving. The gruesome French and Indian War had ended only after taking thousands of lives and leaving in its wake a crippling depression. The imperial coffers were empty, too: the war had nearly doubled Britain's debt. The reasoning of George Grenville, the new Prime Minister, was that the colonies cost us this war and the colonists should pay for it. Hence the Stamp Act. "It will affect Printers more than anybody," Benjamin Franklin predicted from London, where he begged Parliament to reconsider. The Stamp Act turned out to be Britain's worst mistake. ("The Grenville ministry's grossest blunder," Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., called it.) Printers, better than anybody, could fight back. In the words of David Ramsay, a South Carolina delegate to the Continental Congress who wrote, in 1789, the first American history of the Revolution, "It was fortunate for the liberties of America, that newspapers were the subject of a heavy stamp duty. Printers, when uninfluenced by government, have generally arranged themselves on the side of liberty, nor are they less remarkable for attention to the profits of their profession." You don't mess with the men who work the presses. After all, the motto "Don't Tread on Me" was made famous by a man who wanted his gravestone to read "B. Franklin Printer."

In Boston, Benjamin Edes refused to buy stamps and, at John Adams's suggestion, changed the *Gazette's* motto to "A free press maintains the majesty of the people." When Massachusetts's royally appointed governor, Francis Bernard, who believed that Edes's paper "swarmed with Libells of the most atrocious kind," threatened Edes and Gill with prosecution, Adams urged the printers on. Do not,

he told them, “suffer yourselves to be wheedled out of your liberty by any pretences of politeness, delicacy, or decency. These, as they are often used, are but three names for hypocrisy, chicanery, and cowardice.”

On November 1, 1765, that Black Day, Bostonians staged a funeral for Liberty, beneath the Liberty Tree. Edes’s *Gazette* reported on similar funerals held all over the colonies. Everywhere, the story ended the same way. In Portsmouth, New Hampshire, a coffin was “prepared and neatly ornamented, on the Lid of which was wrote LIBERTY, aged 145, STAMP’D, computing from the Era of our Forefathers landing at Plymouth.” But then, lo, a reprieve, otherworldly! The eulogy “was hardly ended before the Corps was taken up, it having been perceived that some Remains of Life were left.” Liberty stirs!

In 1766, Parliament, blindsided by the fervor of the Colonial opposition, repealed the Stamp Act. GAZETTE, like his sister, LIBERTY, woke from the dead. But other taxes soon followed. In 1768, British soldiers landed in Boston to suppress the growing rebellion. During the occupation, Edes helped prepare a daily “Journal of the Times,” featuring stories, most written by Samuel Adams and not all of them true, about atrocities committed by redcoats on the citizens, like the one about a woman who was raped by a soldier and who staggered across the Common, only to die beneath the Liberty Tree. The syndicated “Journal of the Times,” printed in newspapers across the colonies, proved crucial to the resistance movement (and has been credited with originating the political exposé as a journalistic form). “Working the political Engine” is how John Adams described writing for Edes, after a night in 1769 spent “Cooking up Paragraphs” for “the Next Days newspaper.” The following year, Edes, with the help of Samuel Adams and Paul Revere, turned the shooting by British soldiers of five rioting civilians into the “Boston Massacre.” In 1773, the men who dumped the tea in Boston Harbor apparently changed into their disguises in the *Gazette*’s back room. In 1774, a British commander gave his troops a list of men—including John Hancock and Sam Adams—who, the minute war broke out, were to be shot on sight, and he added a postscript: “N.B. Don’t forget those trumpeters of sedition, the printers Edes and Gill.”

By then, there were forty newspapers in the colonies. War came, to Lexington and Concord, on April 19, 1775. That night, in Boston—a city held by the British—Edes and Gill hastily dissolved their partnership. Gill went into hiding. Under cover of darkness, Edes, alone, carted his printing press and types to the Charles River, where he loaded them onto a boat moored at the bank, and rowed through the night to escape the siege. In a nearby town, he set up a makeshift printing shop, and, within weeks, managed to resume printing the *Gazette*, on lumpy paper, with gunky ink. In besieged Boston, British troops searched for Edes but, failing to find him, made do with his nineteen-year-old son. Peter Edes spent months as a prisoner of war. He watched from the window of his cell while a fellow-prisoner, a

Boston painter, was beaten until, broken, he finally called out, “God bless the King.”

**P**eter Edes survived. He became a printer. The war ended. It took some time to figure out what, in a republic, a newspaper was for. Although Benjamin Edes kept printing his *Gazette*, he had lost his best writers. Warren had died at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Otis had gone mad. John Adams had left Boston for good. The political landscape had changed, too. The Revolution was over; now was the time to constitute the nation. Former radicals had to find a way to build a stable government. Edes, like many other poor tradesmen and long-suffering revolutionaries, was stuck in a moment that had passed. He opposed the Constitution, which smacked, to him, of tyranny. He railed against it but found himself an anti-Federalist in a Federalist city. When the government of Massachusetts passed its own stamp tax, Edes argued against it, signing himself “The Printer’s Friend.”

In 1796, Edes’s onetime friend John Adams defeated Thomas Jefferson and became President of the United States. Adams’s high-handed and controversial Administration led to an even more opinionated press, as Marcus Daniel relates in his shrewd study of the newspaper wars of the seventeen-nineties. Printers, whether attacking Adams or, just as zealously, defending him, grew bolder and bolder. “Professions of impartiality I shall make none,” the Federalist newspaperman William Cobbett wrote. “They are always useless, and are besides perfect nonsense.” The printer of the *Connecticut Bee* promised to report

Of turns of fortune, changes in the state,  
The fall of fav’rites, projects of the great,  
Of old mismanagements, taxations new,  
All neither wholly false, nor wholly true.

From 1790 to 1800, Republican printers founded seventy-two new papers (newspapers grew at four times the rate of the population), as Jeffrey Pasley reported in his 2001 study, “The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic.” In Hallowell, Maine, Peter Edes began printing the *Kennebec Gazette*. On page 1 of the first issue, he reprinted Alexander Hamilton’s attack on Adams. (Hamilton deemed Adams a man plagued by “the unfortunate foibles of a vanity without bounds and a jealousy capable of discoloring every object.”) In Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin Bache, Benjamin Franklin’s grandson, and later William Duane, edited the *Aurora*, a newspaper as passionately devoted to the cause of unseating John Adams from the Presidency as James Franklin’s *Courant* had been to tipping over Cotton Mather’s pulpit.

In July of 1798, Adams signed into law the Sedition Act, making defaming his Administration a federal crime. Adams had come to consider printers a scourge: rubbing your rulers is all well and good, but not when the ruler is you. Jefferson intended to run against Adams in the election of 1800. The Sedition Act was set to expire on March 3, 1801, the day before the new President would be

inaugurated, leading many Americans to conclude that Adams simply wished to silence the opposition in order to insure his reelection. Twenty-five people were arrested for sedition, fifteen indicted, and ten convicted; that ten included seven Republican journalists who, like the Edeses, supported Jefferson. Duane, who had earlier suffered much the same fate in India and in Britain, went to jail. Bache was spared trial only because he died of yellow fever before he could be brought to court. Thomas Cooper, a Republican editor, was charged with attempting to bring Adams “into contempt and disrepute and to excite against him the hatred of the good people of the United States.” When Cooper, who served as his own counsel, tried to prove that everything he said about Adams was true (since only false statements defaming the government were, by the terms of the act, seditious), the court refused his request to subpoena the President, found the printer guilty, and sentenced him to six months in prison.

By then, Benjamin Edes was an old man, of declining powers. In 1797, he printed in his *Gazette* a pathetic appeal, trading on his past glories to beg for money, throwing himself “on the benevolence of that Public, to which, as an editor of a paper, I have for upwards of forty-one years been a faithful servant.” Adams’s Presidency left him despairing. Edes, that Trumpeter of Sedition, believed that Adams had betrayed everything his generation had fought for. Had they raised LIBERTY and her brother GAZETTE from the very grave, only to have Adams turn Grim Reaper? Edes, more than most, had reason to take that betrayal personally. It felled him. Two months after Congress passed the Sedition Act, Edes printed his final issue of the *Boston Gazette*. “And now, my Fellow-Citizens,” he wrote, “I bid you FAREWELL! Maintain your Virtue—Cherish your Liberties.” He closed his shop. He moved his printing press into his house. It filled the whole of his small parlor. He spent his days at his press, spectacles slipping down his nose, setting and unsetting types.

“The newspaper is dead, long live the newspaper!” has lately become the incantation of advocates of e-journalism, who argue that the twenty-first-century death of the newspaper hardly merits a moment’s mourning, since it is no death at all but, rather, a rebirth. Even if that turns out to be true—and you have to hope it is true—the digital newspaper could do with a better slogan. Invoking the hereditary succession of a divine line of kings to celebrate the zippy thrill of reading an RSS feed on your iPhone runs counter to the history of the newspaper. Our rulers do not rule over us for as long as they live and, when they die, their heirs do not inherit their titles. That, in short, is what the beginning of the American newspaper was about.

To tell the story this way, as a struggle between tyranny and liberty, between King and Gazette, or even between John Adams and Benjamin Edes, is to write a Whig history, something that historians generally sniff at, mainly because eighteenth-century Whigs (and Whig printers) saw their world in just this way, with themselves on the side of liberty, and people aren’t to be trusted in accounting for their



own place in history. Whig history is suspect, in other words, for much the same reason that Benjamin Franklin's autobiography is suspect. It's too tidy. Most struggles, like most lives, are messier. Newspapers aren't always on the side of liberty. Not everyone agrees on what liberty means. Some struggles never end. And it's not the newspaper that's forever at risk of dying and needing to be raised from the grave. It's the freedom of the press.

Thomas Jefferson was inaugurated on March 4, 1801, the day after the Sedition Act expired. In his Inaugural Address, Jefferson talked about "the contest of opinion," a contest waged, in his lifetime, in the pages of the newspaper. Without partisan and even scurrilous printers pushing the limits of a free press in the seventeen-nineties, Marcus Daniel argues, the legitimacy of a loyal opposition never would have been established and the new nation, with its vigorous and democratizing political culture, might never have found its feet.

Soon after Jefferson came to power, he, like Adams, developed doubts about the unbounded liberty of the press. Printers, Jefferson complained, just days after his election, "live by the zeal they can kindle, and the schisms they can create." In his second Inaugural Address, Jefferson ranted against printers who had assaulted him with "the artillery of the press," warning that he had given some thought to prosecuting them. During his beleaguered second term, Jefferson suggested that newspapers ought to be divided into four sections: Truths, Probabilities, Possibilities, and Lies. What Jefferson wanted for the nation under his governance was a "union of opinion." But that, of course, can never be the aspiration of a democracy—a point that newspapers have been very good at making over the two centuries since.

Benjamin Edes didn't live to see the republic, and the newspaper, endure. Within three years of Jefferson's Inauguration, Edes died, destitute. In his will, he bequeathed to his son Peter a single font of types. The rest of his estate was sold, to settle his debts. It wasn't enough. ♦

ILLUSTRATION: RALPH STEADMAN

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