

The Beginning of NEWSPAPERS

by Mitchell Stephens

THE London Mercury.

Num. 53.

London, From Tuesday October 3. to Friday October 6. 1682.

London, October 5.

THE Poll for the Election of two Persons to be presented to the Court of Aldermen for the Choice of a Lord Mayor, being on Sunday last continued, and then adjourned till Tuesday afternoon, towards the Evening of that Day the Books were entirely closed, and Proclamation made to declare the Suffrages at Ten of the clock on Wednesday Morning; at which time great numbers of People assembled at Guild hall, to hear the final Determination of that Affairs, and the rather, for that it was generally said and believed, That Sir William Brouncker exceeded in a great Majority contrariwise, the Books of the Supervisors of the Lord Chancellor, who will signify His Majesty's further Pleasure therein.

A Woman Hawker was yesterday seized for crying and vending a Paper, entituled, *An Account of the Irregular Proceedings at Guild-hall, about the Swearing the two pretended Sheriffs, Mr. North, and Mr. Rich: but telling where she had them, was discharged, but order'd to appear before the Lord Mayor this day.*

We are credibly informed from Chester, That the late Report spread abroad of Dr. Egge of Coester praying Queen and Duke

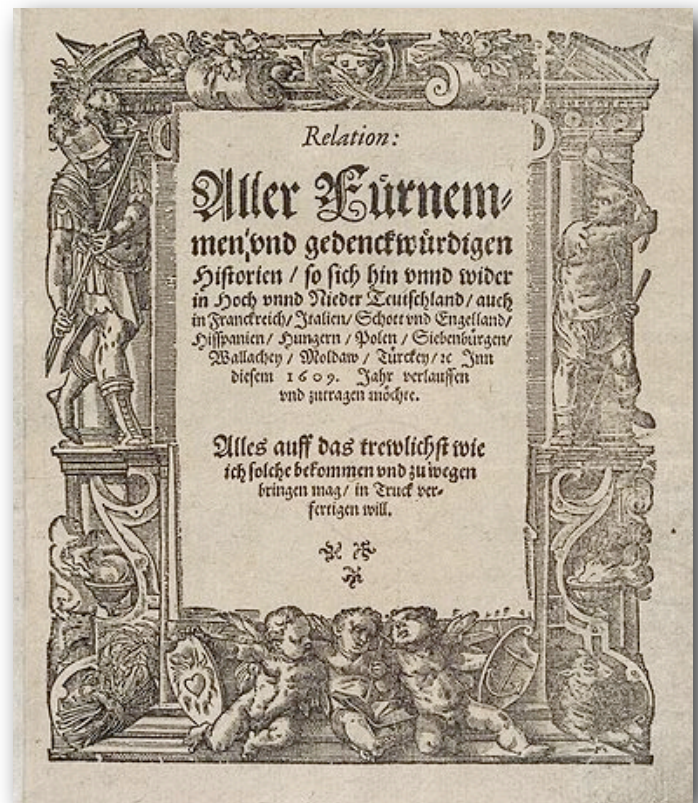
The Beginning of Newspapers

The printing press was used to disseminate news in Europe shortly after Gutenberg invented the letter press, employing movable type, in the 1450s. One of the first printed works that might qualify as news was an Italian account of a tournament printed in about 1470. A letter written by Christopher Columbus, reporting on his discoveries, was set in type and circulating in Barcelona before Columbus arrived there in April of 1493. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, thousands of printed newsbooks, short pamphlets reporting on a news event, and news ballads, accounts of news events written in verse and usually printed on one side of a single sheet of paper, circulated in Europe and, to a lesser extent, in the new European colonies in America. The first news report printed in the Americas described an earthquake in Guatemala and was printed in Mexico in 1541.

Although they touched upon a wide variety of news, these newsbooks and news ballads did not qualify as newspapers because they each appeared only once, to report on only one story, and they each had no identity separate from the particular news story they told.

THE FIRST NEWSPAPERS

The modern newspaper is a European invention. It owes little or nothing to the Roman *acta* (No copies of which survived), or to the early experiments in news dissemination developments in China. (Modern newspapers were introduced to China in the nineteenth century primarily by missionaries and other foreigners.) The oldest direct ancestors of the modern newspaper appear to have been the handwritten news sheets that circulated widely in Venice in the sixteenth century. Venice, like most of the cities that played a major role in the early history of the newspaper, was a center for trade and therefore for information. These Venetian news sheets, known as *avisi* or *gazette*, were filled with information on wars and politics in Italy and Europe. They were distributed weekly as early as 1566 and were seen as far away as London. The style of journalism they employed—short sets of news items, forwarded from a particular city, written under the name of that city and the date on which they were sent—was the style that would be used in most early printed newspapers.



One of the earliest printed newspapers—a weekly from Germany, 1609

The oldest surviving European printed newspapers were both published weekly in German in 1609—one in Strasbourg, *Relations: Aller Furnemmen*, printed by Johann Carolus; the other, *Aviso Relations over Zeitung*, printed by Lucas Schulte, probably in Wolfenbuttel. (To evade government prosecution, these papers did not name the city in which they were printed.) The printed newspaper spread rapidly through Europe. Printed weeklies appeared in Basel by 1610, in Frankfurt and Vienna by 1615, in Hamburg by 1616, in Berlin by 1617 and in Amsterdam by 1618. An English official at the time complained that his country was being “reproved in foreign parts” because it lacked a publication to report “the occurents every week.” The first newspaper printed in England appeared in 1621. France produced a newspaper of its own in 1631. But printers in Amsterdam, a center of trade and of political and religious tolerance in the early seventeenth century, were exporting weeklies in French and in English as early as 1620. Italy’s first printed weekly appeared by 1639 at the latest, Spain’s by 1641.

The oldest surviving newspaper written in English appears to have been published in Amsterdam in 1620 by Pieter van de Keere, a Dutch map and print engraver who had lived in London for a few years.

This first English newspaper begins not with a title—in those early years papers often did not have consistent names—but with an apology: “The new tydings out of Italie are not yet com.” This newspaper ended with a typographical error: Its date was written at the bottom of its second and last page as “the 2. of Decemember.” The roundabout path news traveled to this first English newspaper is well illustrated by the following item:

“Out of Ceulen [Cologne], the 24 of November. Letters of of Neurenburge of the 20 of this present, make mention, that they had advise from the Borders of Bohemia, that there had beene a very great Battel by Prage....”

This news then had to be translated into English, printed and shipped to London. Nevertheless, this was the most timely form in which the English ever had been offered news in print.

The publishers of these early weeklies had to struggle to find fresh news items with which to fill their papers every week. (Many, particularly in England, failed to meet this demanding schedule, and their newspapers appeared late.) They had to struggle to fulfill what one early publisher called the reader’s “expectation of weekly Newes.” These struggles sped up the process of printing news.

Editors could no longer print items at their leisure; there was always that weekly to fill. The pace of events would soon adapt itself to this weekly schedule, as it would later adapt itself to the schedule of daily newspapers and, in recent decades, 24-hour news reports.

The oldest surviving newspaper actually printed in England appeared On September 24, 1621, under the characteristically long title: “Corante, or weekly

newes from Italy, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Bohemia, France and the Low Countreys.” Its publisher gave only his initials, N.B., and unfortunately for the history of English journalism, there were two active printers in London with those initials—Nathaniel Butter and Nicholas Bourne. Cases have been made for both of them as England’s first newspaper journalist. In Paris, Theophraste Renaudot began publishing his *Gazette de France* in 1631. It was the second newspaper printed in France, but it was a particularly thoughtful, though cautious, publication and would survive in essentially the same form until the French Revolution in 1789.

The early newspapers (The earliest known use of this word in English was in 1670) were generally printed in one of two formats: in the style of the Dutch papers, or “corantos,” in which the reports were packed densely only two or perhaps four pages; or the

style of the early German weeklies, which were pamphlets in which the news was spread over eight to twenty-four pages. The various English publishers, including Butter and Bourne, who sometimes competed but often worked together on series of early English newspapers, first used the Dutch style, but switched to the German style by 1622.

News items in these early newspapers were still printed pretty much as they came into the print shop. News of a battle in the Thirty Years War, which was then raging on the Continent, might appear under the name of Vienna, Frankfort or Prague or any other of the handful of cities in which it might have found its way into a letter or a newspaper that in turn found its way to that print shop.

A newspaper might report under one date that a city was

under siege and then under another date that it had fallen. It was a system of journalism that was easy on printers but not on readers. One of the first attempts to change this system, to actually edit stories into more



The second paper published in France began in 1631 and ran until 1789.

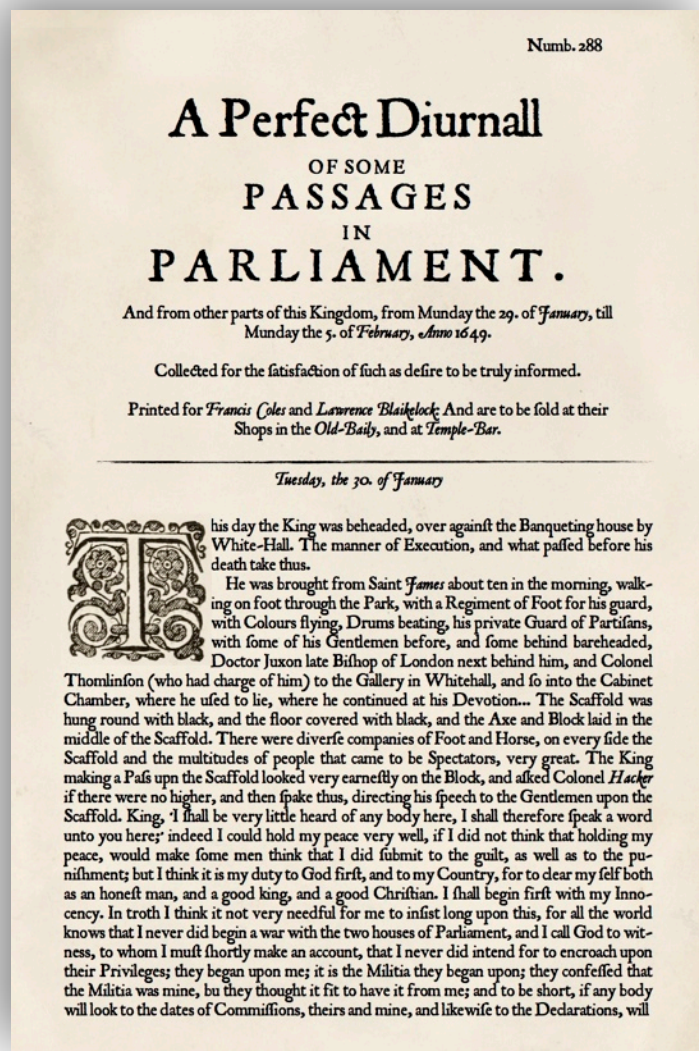
readable narratives, was made in London. This early editor's name was probably Thomas Gainsford, and he appears to have begun work on a series of early English newspapers in 1622.

FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

These newspaper featured items from all over Europe and occasionally America or Asia. But with very few exceptions (mostly in Holland), they never reported any news about the country in which they were printed. Print shops were tightly regulated; in most countries they required government licenses to print; and they could be quickly shut down if they printed anything that offended the authorities. Europe's rulers allowed them to print newspapers as long as these papers did not presume to discuss any local or national issues or events.

The first major change in this arrangement came in the years before the outbreak of the English Civil War. As Parliament, under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell, struggled with King Charles I, national news suddenly assumed a new importance, and newspapers, liberated by the breakdown in the king's authority, began to feel free enough to discuss it. The first English newspaper to attempt to report on national news was a sedate little weekly entitled, *The Heads of Severall Proceedings In This Present Parliament*, which appeared in November 1641. This paper soon had a number of competitors. "And now by a strange alteration and vicissitude of the times," one editor at the time explained, "wee talk of nothing else but what is done in England...." The ideal of freedom of the press was articulated with great eloquence in England 1644 by John Milton in his *Areopagitica*, which, however, was concerned primarily with books and took little notice of these scruffy, little weekly newspapers. Nevertheless, these newspapers, among the first in the world to escape government control, were conducting an important experiment in what a free press might do.

Along with their political coverage, newspapers in England in the 1640s, according to the historian Joseph Frank, were among the first in the world to use headlines, to print advertisements, to illustrate stories with woodcuts, to employ a woman—"a she-intelligencer"—to collect news and to have newsboys, or more commonly newsgirls, sell papers in the streets. They were also among the first newspapers to compete with news-books and news ballads in coverage of sensational events like bloody crimes. By 1649, these newspapers had an opportunity to report on a particularly newsworthy national story: "This day the King



This newspaper from 1649 carries a description of the beheading of Charles I of England.

was beheaded, over against the Banqueting house by White-Hall..." When, after the beheading of Charles I, Cromwell was able to consolidate his power, he cracked down on the press, allowing only a few authorized newspapers to be printed. But the English press burst free again during the Glorious Revolution in 1688. The Licensing Act lapsed in 1695, and a belief in the importance of a press that had the right to criticize government eventually took root in England and was transplanted to its American colonies.

As newspapers became more reliable and began appearing more frequently, they began to play a major role in commerce, through their advertisements and by printing price listings and market reports. A German newspaper, published by Lucas Schulte, had begun appearing two times a week in 1625. The world's oldest surviving printed daily newspaper, *Einkommende Zeitung*, appeared in Leipzig in 1650.

The first successful English daily was the Daily Courant, which first appeared in London in 1702. In the early eighteenth century, according to journalism historian Stanley Morison, the newspaper gained “a hold on London’s commercial classes which it never lost.” At that time, too, great essayists like Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift began publishing newspapers filled with their social and political commentaries in London—though these papers were more similar in content to modern day opinion magazines.

THE FIRST AMERICAN NEWSPAPERS

Britain’s American colonies, because of their sparse populations and strict governments, entered the world of the newspaper relatively late. Public Occurrences, Both FOREIGN and DOMESTICK was printed in Boston on September 25, 1690. The first story in this the first newspaper printed in America seems well chosen: “The Christianized Indians in some parts of Plimouth, have newly appointed a day of thanksgiving to God for his Mercy...” However, if survival was its goal, other items in this paper were less well chosen. Public Occurrences included an attack on some Indians who had fought with the English against the French and an allusion to a salacious rumor about the king of France. This sort of journalism was typical of the paper’s publisher, Benjamin Harris, who had published sensational newspapers in England before he was thrown in jail and then forced to flee to America for printing a particularly incendiary account of a supposed Catholic plot against England. Massachusetts authorities quickly expressed their “high Resentment and Disallowance” of Public Occurrences. The first issue of America’s first newspaper was also the last. It would be fourteen years before another newspaper was published in the colonies.

The Boston News-Letter, America’s second printed newspaper, grew out of a handwritten newsletter that had been distributed by the town’s postmaster,

John Campbell. It was a much tamer affair than Harris’s paper—filled primarily with reports on English and European politics taken from London papers. The Boston News-Letter, which first appeared in print in 1704, survived for 72 years.

Campbell lost the position of postmaster in 1719, but he refused to give up the newspaper. So, his replacement as postmaster, William Brooker, began printing his own newspaper, the Boston Gazette, on December 21, 1719. A day later, the third successful American newspaper, the American Weekly Mercury, appeared in Philadelphia.

These papers were careful, for the most part, not to offend colonial authorities. The first paper to attempt to give voice to political debate was Boston’s third successful newspaper, the New England Courant, which was first printed in 1721 by James Franklin. The Courant was the most literary and readable of the early colonial newspapers, and in its first issue it began a political crusade. The issue was smallpox inoculations,

which were first being used in Boston that year used to fight an epidemic. Cotton Mather, one of the most powerful men in Boston, supported inoculation. James Franklin did not. So the first American newspaper crusade was a crusade against smallpox inoculation. The next year, the Courant took on the colonial government, which it accused of failing to do enough to protect the area from pirates. This crusade landed James Franklin in jail.

Later a court decreed that “James Franklin be strictly forbidden...to print or publish the New- England Courant...” To evade this order, James Franklin made his younger brother Benjamin, who was apprenticed to him, the paper’s official publisher. Ben used the situation to escape from his ap-

prenticeship. Benjamin Franklin took over control of the Pennsylvania Gazette in Philadelphia in 1729, made it into one of the finest papers in the colonies and embarked upon an extraordinary career as a writer, journalist, printer, businessman, postmaster, scientist and statesman.

