
Debating the Issues in Colonial Newspapers

*Primary Documents on
Events of the Period*

DAVID A. COPELAND



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Introduction: Newspapers in Colonial America

In 1690 Boston printer Benjamin Harris decided it was time to publish a newspaper. He believed Massachusetts needed one so that people could have a better understanding of public affairs, business, and, in fact, all the occurrences that take place and affect everyone. He called his paper, quite appropriately, *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick*. Even though the Massachusetts Bay government did not like the idea of Harris publishing *all* the information that he received and shut down the newspaper after one issue, the love of Americans for news of all sorts could not be denied or controlled through censorship. Sixty years later, another printer, James Parker of New York, wrote that the taste Americans had for news could not be understood by foreigners, and then added, news was something that Americans “can’t be without.”¹

For more than 250 years, newspapers served as the principal source of news for Americans, and despite the introduction of numerous other media in the last 100 years, newspapers still offer the most in-depth analysis of events of all media. But what were newspapers like in their infancy in America? Were they like today’s newspapers, or were they different? Today’s reader would find many things about America’s newspapers before the Revolution to be familiar. The same reader would also sometimes find it difficult to understand the language, arrangement, and content of the early newspapers. Still, the newspapers of colonial America established all of the newspaper practices in use today with the exception of color printing and photographs, techniques not yet invented.

Even though the printing press arrived in America in 1636 and Harris

printed *Publick Occurrences* in 1690, the first continually published paper in America did not appear until 1704, when the *Boston News-Letter* was begun, and it had no competition until 1719. Newspaper production in America then began to grow and prosper. By 1736 printers had begun weekly newspapers in seven of the American colonies with multiple newspapers in Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania. A dozen newspapers existed in America at that time, a number that remained constant for the next twenty years.

In the mid-1750s, American newspapers experienced a growth spurt fueled by the French and Indian War, which lasted from 1754 to 1763. The desire for all the information available about the war that threatened the very existence of the British American colonies led directly to more newspapers throughout America. Newspaper starts from 1754 to 1760 increased by about 73 percent, from eleven to nineteen. The population increased only about 36 percent, from slightly more than 1.17 million inhabitants to slightly more than 1.59 million. By 1763 there were twenty-three papers in America.² The number of newspapers grew again with the Stamp Act crisis of 1765. By 1775 and the beginning of the American Revolution, forty newspapers provided Americans with news, and every colony except Vermont had at least one newspaper by that time.

With the increase in newspapers came an increase in circulation, as well. Newspapers in 1750, for example, had an average circulation of about 600 copies per week. By the Stamp Act crisis, these figures topped 1,500 in some towns and grew to more than 3,500 in some cases before the Revolution. It must be remembered that no colonial town had more than 15,000 inhabitants by 1750, and only three could boast populations between 20,000 and 30,000 by 1775. Also, most large colonial towns—Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, for example—had four or five newspapers; obviously, newspaper readership was sizable. Most literate people had access to newspapers, and newspapers, which were sold by subscription, were read aloud in taverns, making their information available to all within hearing.

American newspapers before the Revolution were weeklies, but several printers attempted multiweek publications. For printers, producing papers more than once a week proved difficult because of the limited amount of news, paper, and advertising revenue available to them. Still, nearly every printer in America would issue supplements between regular publication dates when important news was received.

Newspaper production essentially followed the same printing process that Johannes Gutenberg used in 1455 when he invented the printing press. Printers and their apprentices used lead type. Each letter of type was handset by sliding it into a “stick,” a piece of metal designed to hold letters. Once a line of type was completed, it was placed in an iron frame, which was approximately the size of the newspaper page. When the frame



The Print Shop. Printers worked in various-sized shops, ranging from one to three printing presses, in colonial America. Apprentices, journeyman printers, and master printers all worked to produce publications as depicted in this portrayal of the Franklin print shop. Because printers often sold other items in addition to newspapers and pamphlets, the print shop was often a busy place with customers inquiring on items offered for sale by the printer.

was filled, the sticks were locked into place and the frame placed on the press. Using a dauber made of animal skin, an apprentice inked the letters. The printer then transferred the impression of the letters in the frame to the piece of paper. After one side of the paper was printed, it had to be hung up to dry. Once dry, the other side could be printed. Most printers required the workers in their shops to produce up to 250 impressions per hour. Generally, if the shop could not meet its quota, no one was paid.

Colonial newspapers were usually two to four pages in length. Four-page papers were made by taking a piece of paper and folding it so that pages one and four were on one side of the sheet and pages two and three on the other. Even though most papers were of this length, printers sometimes ran papers six to ten pages in length weekly. In order to print a paper of this length, a printer usually needed more than one press. Only the most successful of printers, such as Benjamin Franklin, had multiple-press shops.

Printers' resources were often in short supply. Printers imported lead type from England. Ink could be made in the colonies, but the process was not easy. It involved boiling linseed oil and mixing it with lampblack,

the soot produced from burning oil or tar. Paper was not always easy to obtain, either, and its size varied because paper was made of cloth, not wood. *Publick Occurrences* was printed on pages 7.5 inches by 11.5 inches, but later papers approached the size of today's supermarket tabloids. Printers often asked readers to donate old rags to be turned into newsprint. *Virginia Gazette* printer William Parks made this request cleverly in a poem:

Nice Delia's Smock, which, neat and whole,
No man durst finger for his Soul;
Turn'd to Gazette, now all the Town,
May take it up, or smooth it down.
Whilst Delia may with it dispense,
And no Affront to Innocence.³

Even though lead type wore out and ink and paper were sometimes in short supply, printers before the Revolution produced their newspapers on a regular basis. Printers rarely missed a week or changed the day of publication, even if it happened to fall on Christmas.

Printers—and society in general—did not have a standard grammar or dictionary. Spelling and punctuation in newspapers therefore varied. Nearly all nouns were capitalized in newspapers through the first half of the eighteenth century. Run-on sentences were common, and commas were dashed about in stories much as one uses salt or pepper to season food. Words could appear in stories spelled in a variety of ways. While these grammatical errors might be a distraction to readers of later eras, they do not appear to have distracted readers in the eighteenth century. In this work, the original capitalization, spelling, and punctuation are preserved. Some of the newspaper selections, then, will seem archaic in construction while others will appear quite modern.

A year's subscription to the first colonial newspapers cost about 11 percent of the average person's yearly salary, about \$1.54 out of an income of \$14.30 in today's money.⁴ Carriers—usually one of the printer's apprentices—delivered the papers to subscribers in town, and postal riders carried them to neighboring communities. The high cost of newspapers may help to explain why circulation was not large during the newspapers' beginning years in America. Printers in the eighteenth century—as well as publishers today—depended on advertising as the newspaper's chief source of revenue. Colonial advertisements looked more like today's classified advertisements. Advertising usually appeared on the last page of the paper, but printers such as Benjamin Franklin wisely began to insert advertisements throughout the paper, even on the front page, which meant readers were more likely to see them because they were not separated from the news. As part of the advertisements, printers used woodcuts to provide readers with visuals. The woodcut could be a

carving of a ship, book, person, or anything else in a small block of wood. The block was placed into the frame with the lettering, and its highlights were inked, which produced a picture to draw the attention of readers to the advertisement. Most newspaper advertisements dealt with commodities. The most prominent advertisements centered on the slave trade and runaway slaves. These advertisements listed the slave and her or his attributes. The runaway ads often listed the reward for return of the slave.

The news in papers before the Revolution depended on a number of sources. In some ways, the information-gathering process differed greatly from today's practices. In other ways, eighteenth-century papers paved the way for later publications. Newspapers depended on letters, people arriving in town by land or sea, other newspapers, official government announcements, and correspondents for news. The correspondent, a person who lived somewhere in or near a town, wrote to the printer telling him about local occurrences. The idea of a reporter who went out and gathered the news did not exist in America until the French and Indian War, and even then, references to the "weekly news writer" were rare.

As important events in the colonies took place, the sharing of news from paper to paper became even more important. Printers in Boston, for example, counted on Southern newspapers for information on the Cherokee War of 1759 to 1761, which was fought in the South but had repercussions for Native American relations in other regions. Southern printers, in turn, expected the same from New England printers in the 1770s, during the British blockade and occupation of Boston. Patriot printers started the "Journal of Occurrences," a distribution service for news that chronicled the city's occupation. What was being created by printers was a news distribution service much like today's Associated Press.

To be sure the information they printed was accurate, printers sought out verification for their important stories. Two Boston printers, William and John Fleet, for example, assumed accuracy in a story from Jamaica because it had originally appeared in the island's newspapers. The brothers also would not report that France had surrendered Canada in the French and Indian War until the story could be verified from another source. Through the "colonial wire service" and verification of important facts, the newspapers of the colonial period established important precedents for the media that followed.

Even though printers developed methods of newsgathering and verification that are still in use, news moved slowly. In an age when news is dispersed in a matter of minutes, it is hard to understand how news of events that sometimes happened six months earlier could be of value. News of an occurrence that is new to you and affects your life is of value, however, no matter when it is received. This fact was especially true in colonial America. News from Europe often took six months to reach

America, and the fastest news could move from one end of the colonies to the other was about three weeks. The speed of sharing news would not increase until the invention of the telegraph in the nineteenth century.

Much of the news contained in colonial newspapers centered upon political topics. Just as today, what happened in the world and in government affected colonial Americans. Newspapers did not limit the scope of their content and discussion to politics, however. America's first newspapers discussed every imaginable topic, and many printers placed the slogan "the freshest Advices Foreign and Domestic" below the paper's name. Philadelphia printer William Goddard summed up the content of newspapers in 1767 by placing the following in the nameplate of his *Pennsylvania Chronicle*: "Containing the freshest Advices, both Foreign and Domestic; with a Variety of other Matter; useful, instructive and entertaining."

The news of the eighteenth century was often more graphic than today's news. Descriptions of rapes, murders, executions, and other events were often printed with intricate detail. To read this news, however, one had to search through newspapers. Newspapers rarely contained headlines as we think of them today. Instead, news changed from paragraph to paragraph, which meant one had to read the entire newspaper to discover all the news; one could not selectively jump from one story to another based on interest generated by headlines. Furthermore, the latest news was rarely found on the front page; it usually appeared on the inside of the paper, often the last part to be printed.

The front page of colonial newspapers was usually reserved for letters, essays, and news that could be set well before press day. Following the practice of English printers, the front page generally featured material on issues that could be discussed or debated by readers, such as opinion pieces or editorials, although the word "editorial" was never used during the colonial era.

The front page was not the only place that opinions appeared in newspapers nor was the shaping of public opinion necessarily the central purpose of printers during the colonial period. Printers initially regarded their products as journals of occurrences or as a record of events. In two of America's earliest papers, *Publick Occurrences* and the *Boston Gazette*, the printers announced their chief purpose was to present the latest news to help people understand public affairs or trade.

Competition for readers ended the notion that newspapers were solely journals of record. With multiple papers in towns, printers needed to find an edge to increase circulation and income. Dealing in controversy was one answer. Again following the British example, printers from 1720 on increasingly added opinion essays to their newspapers. The subject matter of opinion pieces varied, but before the middle of the eighteenth

century, most opinion pieces dealt with education, medicine, religion, and gender issues including marriage.

As America grew more populous and economically independent, political issues became the central focus of opinion in newspapers. But politics also played a role in many of the issues surrounding education, medicine, and religion. When the citizens of Boston began arguing about the validity of inoculating against smallpox in 1721, for example, an underlying issue dealt with political and religious control of the colony. Congregationalists such as Cotton Mather supported inoculation, while Anglicans such as Dr. William Douglass opposed it. While the two sides argued about inoculation, they also were positioning themselves for political power in Massachusetts.⁵ Even though political debate became the central focus of opinion articles in newspapers in the twenty-five years before the Revolution, writers of opinion still used the press in attempts to sway readers on almost all imaginable subjects. When women began to petition courts for divorces in the 1770s, both sexes wrote to papers in an attempt to sway public opinion. One female writer closed her argument with a long poem that said abuse of wives by husbands should always be grounds to end a marriage. “Tho’ husbands are tyrants, their wives will be free,” she declared.⁶

Even though printers may have held opinions on the myriad of subjects discussed in their papers, the authors of the opinions usually were not the printers. As Boston printer Thomas Fleet said in 1733 in the *Weekly Rehearsal*, “The Publisher declares himself of no Party, and Invites all Gentlemen of Leisure and Capacity, inclined to either side, to write anything of a political Nature, that tends to enlighten and serve the Public.”⁷ Printers, especially in the first half of the eighteenth century, may have proposed an open and impartial press for a number of reasons. First, they may have considered themselves as purely artisans or tradesmen who produced a product for public consumption.⁸

Second, printers may have opened their presses to the citizens for financial reasons. A newspaper with from 300 to 500 weekly subscriptions probably could not support a printer if its news alienated half of those readers. Printers, therefore, would welcome opinions from all sides of an issue to use their newspapers as forums for the community and to stimulate circulation and profits. Similarly, printers might reject opinion articles if they felt the message was too highly charged or morally or ethically offensive to most readers.

Even though printers sometimes refused to publish controversial letters and essays, writings were usually inserted regardless of topic. That may have been because printers often charged a fee for printing essays and letters in newspapers. The acceptance of money to publish an opinion piece does not lessen its persuasive power; it merely supports the concept that printers kept their presses open to all for financial reasons.

When South Carolina printer Lewis Timothy began printing a series of essays in 1735 written by a group of Charleston citizens known as the “Meddler’s Club” that intruded upon the affairs of the town’s citizens, he no doubt received compensation. Later, his son Peter noted that an anonymous political essayist had failed to pay “the Price notified for publishing the same.”⁹

The content of newspapers was not always open to all sides. Boston citizens opposing the use of inoculation to fight smallpox in Boston in 1721 hired James Franklin to publish a newspaper opposing the practice. Franklin’s *New-England Courant* never proposed itself to be an unbiased publication, only that it would not directly attack the clergy or the government, two promises the paper’s writers broke in less than two years. Similarly, some New York politicians initiated the *New-York Weekly Journal* purely as a means to attack the government of Governor William Cosby, which culminated in the arrest of the paper’s printer, John Peter Zenger.

If printers did not write the opinion pieces in newspapers, who did? The answer to this question is hard to determine because most letters and essays during the colonial era were either unsigned or attributed to a writer who chose to close them with a pseudonym that often described the author’s intentions. Often, the pseudonym was a Latin or Greek term or phrase such as “Philo-Patria,” or lover of country. Despite the use of pseudonyms, the identity of anonymous writers was sometimes known to readers, which was the case with a series of letters titled “Letters from a Pennsylvania Farmer” that sought to unify colonial opposition to the British. Americans knew the writer was John Dickinson. At other times, authors of letters and essays remained a mystery. In 1756 a series of essays appeared first in the *Virginia Gazette*, soon to be reprinted in nearly every town in America. The essays by the “Virginia Centinel” sought to increase solidarity among colonials to defeat the French and Indians during the French and Indian War. While the author of the essay series may have been known by the *Gazette*’s printer, all that was revealed about the writer was that he was a minister, speculated by some to be James Maury. Maury never admitted to writing the series, however.¹⁰ Most of the letters or essays that appeared in the papers, then, were written by influential and educated members of a community. Dickinson was not a farmer but a lawyer and politician, and the “Virginia Centinel” was probably a minister who occupied a place of importance in Virginia society. Anonymity, no doubt, allowed writers to speak more freely in an age when criticizing the government was considered a crime even if the offenders were not always prosecuted.

Even though printers in general did not write opinion articles in the first half of the eighteenth century, they increasingly did so in the twenty-five years before the Revolution. The most well-known of America’s early

printers, Benjamin Franklin, however, was one printer who honed his opinion-writing skills at an early age, contrary to the habit of printers not to write lengthy opinion essays. Serving as an apprentice in Boston, the teenaged Franklin used the name “Silence Dogood” to write a series of opinion essays on Massachusetts politics and life in his brother’s *New-England Courant* in 1723. He did the same as “The Busy-Body” in Philadelphia in the *American Weekly Mercury* in 1729.

As America’s situation changed, so, too, did Franklin’s opinion writing. In the May 9, 1754, *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Franklin used his persuasive skills to warn Americans that their way of life was in danger of being destroyed if they did not unite “for our common Defence and Security” and “under one Direction, with one Council, and one Purse.” Even though Franklin’s “JOIN, or DIE” essay or editorial was unsigned, all who read the *Gazette* knew the paper’s owner was the author. Other printers quickly copied the woodcut of a disjointed snake—America’s first editorial cartoon—and Franklin’s essay.

The French and Indian War seemed to bring out the editorial skills of printers. New York printer Hugh Gainé, for example, echoed Franklin’s sentiments when he added the following editorial note to a piece titled “*The PRESENT STATE of this Continent*”:

*I hope, and pray the Almighty, That the British Colonies on this continent, may cease impolitically and ungenerously to consider themselves as distinct States . . . that they unite like Brother Protestants, and Brother Subjects . . . and secure to themselves and their Posterity, to the Ends of Time, the inestimable Blessings of Civil and Religious Liberty, and the Possession and Settlement of a great Country, rich in all the Fountains of human Liberty.*¹¹

The same kinds of insertions aimed at changing public opinion were made by printers from the Stamp Act crisis of 1765, when printers and other Americans protested British taxes on paper, through the beginning of the Revolution and beyond. During the Revolutionary period, three Boston printers—Benjamin Edes, John Gill, and Isaiah Thomas—consistently wrote invectives for their papers. Edes and Gill railed against the British after the Boston Massacre, where an American mob confronted British soldiers in 1770 and five citizens were killed, and Thomas put the Battle of Lexington into the American perspective when he wrote in the *Massachusetts Spy* on May 3, 1775, “AMERICANS! Forever bear in mind the BATTLE OF LEXINGTON!—where British troops, unmolested and unprovoked, wantonly and in a most inhuman manner, fired upon and killed a number of our countrymen, then robbed, ransacked, and burnt their houses!”

All of these printers—Franklin, Gainé, Edes, Gill, and Thomas, as well as others—were making intentional personal efforts to sway public opin-

ion with their newspapers. From the inception of newspapers in America, printers had been expressing personal opinion with statements appended to stories or through their choices of news to print. But they often encountered opposition. *Publick Occurrences*, for example, was published only once in part because its printer, Benjamin Harris, inserted hearsay into a news article about shipping and military problems with France. The Massachusetts council reckoned that hearsay was libelous and ordered Harris never to print in Boston again. Harris' assertion that the French king Louis XIV "used to lie with the Sons Wife,"¹² although not an opinion article, was no doubt an effort to further colonial dislike and distrust of France and was intentionally placed in the paper by Harris for that purpose. Boston printer Thomas Fleet did the same in 1740 when he inserted the following sentence after a story about the itinerant minister George Whitefield's departure from Boston: "the town is in a hopeful Way of being restor'd to its former State of Order, Peace and Industry."¹³ Printers also made editorial comment about events by inserting scripture, poetry, and parody before and after news items.

Whether written by printers or others, the essays and letters in colonial newspapers helped shape the opinions of Americans. The news selected by printers to appear in their newspapers also helped mold thoughts in eighteenth-century America.

This book presents debates on issues of importance in colonial America as they were discussed in newspapers. Each chapter focuses upon a specific event or issue during the colonial period, from the introduction of newspapers in 1690 through the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. It presents writings on both sides of an issue as printers and other colonists used newspapers to sway public opinion. Material is drawn from many of America's newspapers during this period, but newspapers located in the larger towns of the colonies—Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston—often are central to issues of the times, especially if the event or issue centered in that city or its colony.

The selection of events and issues for such a book is subjective to a certain extent but also limited by newspaper content. The work is organized chronologically by issue or event. Some broader issues, such as the role of women in society, are also included. The newspaper articles selected reflect a variety of stances on events and issues. Thirty-one issues of concern in the colonial era are featured in this work. Each issue concludes with questions for discussion.

NOTES

1. *New-York Gazette Revived in the Weekly Post-Boy*, 22 January 1750, 1.
2. David A. Copeland, "JOIN, or DIE: America's Newspapers in the French and Indian War," *Journalism History* 24 (1998): 118.

3. *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg), 26 July 1744.
4. Monetary figures based on conversions found in John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America 1607–1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 57, 61.
5. See Wm. David Sloan, “The *New-England Courant*: Voice of Anglicanism,” *American Journalism* 8 (1991): 108–41.
6. *New-York Journal*, 25 October 1770, 4. For the arguments put forth by both sides, see David A. Copeland, “Virtuous and Vicious: The Dual Portrayal of Women in Colonial Newspapers,” *American Periodicals* 5 (1995): 72–76.
7. *Weekly Rehearsal* (Boston), 2 April 1733.
8. See Stephen Botein, “‘Meer Mechanics’ and an Open Press: The Business and Political Strategies of Colonial American Printers,” in *Perspectives in American History*, vol. 9, ed. Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 127–225.
9. Quoted in Hennig Cohen, *The South Carolina Gazette* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1953), 10.
10. See J. A. Leo Lemay, *A Calendar of American Poetry* (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1972), 183–84.
11. *New-York Mercury*, 23 September 1754, 2 (emphasis included).
12. *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick* (Boston), 25 September 1690, 3.
13. *Boston Evening-Post*, 29 September 1740, 2.

Censorship, Printing Control, and Freedom of the Press, 1690

When an American hears the terms freedom of the press and freedom of speech, his or her thoughts turn immediately to the First Amendment, which reads, “Congress shall make no laws . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.” Not all people, however, interpret of the First Amendment in the same way. Some people believe that because the amendment states “no laws,” no constraints should be placed on media or the speech of anyone. Most people believe that the media’s rights guaranteed by the First Amendment should be balanced with other rights enjoyed by Americans.

The concept of what media may print or broadcast is constantly undergoing revision. The ultimate decision of what receives protection under the First Amendment comes from rulings made by the U.S. Supreme Court. Any notion that we might have of what freedom of the press means for media today would have been unacceptable to almost all Americans living in the colonial period. Americans operated under British law, under which many kinds of speech were illegal, especially criticism of government. Most American colonists believed in freedom of speech and the press. Many of the settlers who colonized what would become the United States came here to escape religious persecution, and they talked and wrote of free speech in relation to their rights to publish religious material that supported their understanding of the Bible.

Dissension from the religious rules set up in America by groups such as the Puritans occurred in the colonies just as it did in England. Because of this criticism, England established laws that required printers to have

all that they printed approved by government officials. Known as licensing, all colonial governors received directions in 1686 “that no person keep any printing-press for printing, nor that any book, pamphlet, or other matter whatsoever be printed without your especiall leave and license first obtained.”¹

In 1690 printer Benjamin Harris violated that law. Harris, who came to America the same year that the licensing law went into effect, believed that Boston needed a newspaper so that its citizens could be kept apprised of all events that affected them. On September 25, 1690, he published *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick*. The three-page newspaper contained no attacks on the licensing law or complaints about the government; it simply related to its readers what was going on—a smallpox outbreak, a murder, a good harvest among the “Christianized” Indians, the execution of Native American prisoners of war, and a report that the king of France, Louis XIV, might be sleeping with his son’s wife. Massachusetts officials would probably never have approved the printing of the last two items, and therein lay the problem for Harris. His publication and its contents were never approved by the governor. On September 29, the governor ordered that Harris never publish *Publick Occurrences* again. America’s first newspaper printed but one issue before it died at the censor’s hand.

Newspaper success in the early eighteenth century was tied directly to governmental approval of content, but the idea that a newspaper needed the endorsement of a political body did not last long. Printers of Boston’s *New-England Courant* and Philadelphia’s *American Weekly Mercury* both experienced run-ins with the authorities in the early 1720s when the printers published material critical of some aspect of leadership in their colony.

By 1735 America’s colonies had grown large enough to foster political dissension. No longer was press control proposed for religious reasons. The trial of John Peter Zenger (Chapter 5) revolved around who would control New York politics. Zenger’s paper, the *New-York Weekly Journal*, attacked the government of Governor William Cosby and defended its right to do so as freedom of the press. Another New York printer, James Parker, defied the colony’s government and published objectionable material in 1747. In 1756 Parker called into question the results of an election. He defended his right to do so as freedom of the press. Slowly, Americans were developing the concept of freedom of the press as a means of checking government actions, stirring agitation for causes, and fighting laws some believed to be tyrannical. When England attempted to impose a tax on paper in 1765, the colonists, regarding the tax as an attack on American freedoms, erupted in protest.

By the 1770s, newspapers were regarded as a principal instrument in the fight for freedom from England, but not all printers thought inde-

pendence was proper. Tory printers, who felt America should remain part of Britain, found their presses destroyed and their likenesses hanged in effigy by angry Patriots who supported America's separation from Great Britain. Even though the majority of Americans demanded a free press to criticize government, minority opposition was often suppressed. Freedom of the press—even though it had left behind religious restraints—was still meant principally for those in control. The *Massachusetts Spy* proclaimed in 1772, "However lordly fools would be!! FOREVER shall the PRESS be FREE!!"² But the author of the lines no doubt never intended that the "fools" be given press access to espouse opposing viewpoints, even though many printers in the 1770s claimed they believed in the concept of an open and unbiased press by declaring in their nameplates that their papers were "Open to all Parties, but Influenced by None," as did printer John Pinkney's *Virginia Gazette*.

Even if printers consciously limited the information presented in their newspapers to one side of an issue, publishing articles that called for limiting free speech were rare. This chapter includes one newspaper essay from the 1730s that explains why limiting the press was necessary. It also contains two pieces from the 1770s that call for limiting press freedom, one an essay in the pro-British newspaper the *Censor*, the other a letter from a person signing himself "Tory." Both attack the freedom of the press as it was used by American Patriots to attack British officials when these same Patriots used whatever means possible to silence Tory or Loyalist publications.

The chapter begins with a selection of pieces advocating limitations on freedom of the press. The first two are statements by seventeenth-century policymakers, Virginia Governor William Berkeley in 1671 and the Massachusetts Bay governing council in 1690. The section ends with a statement by jurist Francis Hopkinson on the dangers of criticizing government, which includes self-interest, partisanship, and sedition.

A selection of pieces defending freedom of the press begins with an essay that appeared over a four-week period in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1737. The author of the essay was probably James Alexander, the person behind the printed attacks on New York Governor William Cosby in 1733 and 1734. Alexander wrote in response to essays from Barbados criticizing the trial of John Peter Zenger. This piece is followed by a series of essays on freedom of speech and of the press printed by Benjamin Edes and John Gill after they assumed control of the *Boston Gazette* in April 1755. The series included "An Apology for the LIBERTY of the PRESS" and was probably printed by the Patriot-minded printers to establish the agenda of the paper under their tenure. The series is followed by a 1767 *Boston Gazette* essay that may well have been a collaboration with the printers' good friend Samuel Adams. Adams, Edes, and Gill were outspoken opponents of British intervention in the colonies. While the

three advocated free speech and a free press, their opponents claimed “they would confine it wholly to themselves.”³ The chapter closes with a *New-Hampshire Gazette* statement on the value of a free press to society shortly before the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

IN FAVOR OF CENSORSHIP AND PRESS LIMITATIONS

WILLIAM BERKELEY: “ENQUIRIES TO THE GOVERNOR OF VIRGINIA”

British law required colonial governors to issue reports on the state of their colonies and to reply to any questions that might arise concerning the colonies. In 1671 the Lords Commissioners of Foreign Plantations sent Virginia Governor William Berkeley a questionnaire on the state of religion in his province. In his reply, the governor lamented the fact that religious life in Virginia could be better, and he added the statement below on the state of the press there. Berkeley’s statement accurately describes the perception of most colonial governments on the potential dangers of a press not controlled by government licensing, especially in matters of religion and politics.

“Enquiries to the Governor of Virginia,” 1671

I thank God, there are no free schools nor printing; and I hope we shall not have these hundred years; for learning has brought disobedience, and heresy, and sects into the world, and printing has divulged them, and libels against the government. God keep us from both!
William Berkeley

THE GOVERNOR’S COUNCIL OF MASSACHUSETTS: “THE SUPPRESSION OF PUBLICK OCCURRENCES”

The political situation in Boston during 1690 was chaotic. Taxpayers had revolted against the colony’s policies, the French and their Indian allies were at war with the British, and many of the farms and plantations throughout the colony lay in ruin. In order to separate rumor from fact, Benjamin Harris began a newspaper, Publick Occurrences. Four days after its publication, the governing council ordered the newspaper suppressed and Harris never again to print a newspaper in Massachusetts. The decree stated that any future printing must be licensed by the colony’s government. As a result, the newspapers printed in Bos-