Trova il testo completo

Abstract

Jürgen Habermas, in particular, has described the market for news as an arena for the development of critical, rational public discourse in the "public sphere" and thus of civil society. This concept of the public sphere has provoked a far-reaching theoretical conversation about the necessary conditions for and utopian possibilities of democratic society. The necessity of using some familiar language to shape concepts of the public might account for the continual failure of particular historical situations to live up to the utopian potential of the public sphere.

Testo completo

In weekly newspapers, eighteenth-century British readers could find periodically updated reports on the actions of their government, on events in other countries, and on marriages, deaths, accidents, bankruptcies, and the weather. The availability of this news plays a central role in narratives of the development of mercantile capitalism and republican government. Jürgen Habermas, in particular, has described the market for news as an arena for the development of critical, rational public discourse in the "public sphere" and thus of civil society. This concept of the public sphere has provoked a far-reaching theoretical conversation about the necessary conditions for and utopian possibilities of democratic society. The discussion has so far been carried out, however, at a distance from the archive. Looking at the texts of the newspapers themselves provides a specific image of the development of public participation in politics. Rather than moving away from the court to the town, as in Habermas's account, eighteenth-century British newspapers describe the public moving to the periphery of the court, where readers were invited to participate, at a distance, in politics as practiced by the king and his courtiers. Newspapers created an image of their readers eavesdropping at the palace rather than declaiming in the public square.

The familiar language of business as usual around the court, I argue, made the abstract process of commodifying and circulating information comprehensible to the people engaged in developing the institutions of the press and the public sphere. This language, however, shaped participation and knowledge around traditional expectations and relationships associated with alliance, loyalty, and patronage. The necessity of using some familiar language to shape concepts of the public might account for the continual failure of particular historical situations to live up to the utopian potential of the public sphere. Habermas describes this failure in his title: the "transformation of the public sphere" into a realm directed by commercial institutions and the welfare state is a falling-off from the utopian potential of a realm separate from the state and the various organized interests.
failure of particular historical situations to live up to the Utopian potential of the public sphere. Habermas describes this failure in his title: the "transformation of the public sphere" into a realm directed by commercial institutions and the welfare state is a falling-off from the Utopian potential of a realm separate from the state and other organized interests. His critics and commentators have pointed to the problem in other ways: Nancy Fraser calls Habermas’s concept "not wholly satisfactory" because "it rested on, indeed was importantly constituted by, a number of significant exclusions." Women, working-class people, and those who could not practice discursive decorum had no access to the realm of free discussion, in theory or in practice. Michael Warner wishes for a world "in which embodied sociability, affect, and play have a more defining role than they do in the opinion-transposing frame of rational-critical dialogue."3 In each case, the Utopian potential of a sphere of inclusive action directed toward the public good is somehow derailed by exclusions. These exclusions, for Fraser and Warner, are defined by concepts of participation based on the activities of bourgeois subjects.

An antecedent of this tendency to base the concept of public action on the activities of a particular group can be found in London newspapers published in the 1750s and 1760s, which consistently framed political information in terms derived from the court. This framing took the form of oral tags. Writers and printers reported on what "we hear," what "is said," and upon "clamours and alarms." In order to understand the specific meaning of terms like "we hear" in eighteenth-century politics, it is helpful to compare newspaper writing to writing in other media. The Georgian court was surrounded by a complex web of discourse in several media. Coffeehouses, card parties, and dinners provided venues for discussing the day’s events and the morrow’s plans. Diaries allowed participants to record promises made and broken, smiles and snubs received and distributed. Letters provided allies with vital information about the dispositions of powerful people and the shifting fortunes of ministers and favorites. The letters of the Temple family, Horace Walpole, and many other contemporary writers use terms such as "clamour" and "we hear" in strikingly consistent ways. During the course of the eighteenth century, as newspapers became mass-produced commodities increasingly available to the citizens of London and the nation, much of the work of government continued to be carried out orally, for an audience that was referred to as "the public" or "the world," even as it excluded many British people. At court, members of the royal family, their attendants, officials, members of parliament, hangers-on, and servants made policy, distributed patronage, and worked to accumulate honor and money for their families. They did so through venerable and highly formal practices of talk and behavior: long visits, charming conversation, smiles and frowns, negotiations, promises, and complaints.4

These forms of talk and behavior were not practiced as part of an unarticulated cultural common sense. Instead, the manners and strategies of courtly behavior had names and were taught to young men and women by their more experienced allies or patrons. Lord Chesterfield’s letters are familiar examples of a common form of instruction, practiced both orally and in writing. Explicit descriptions of the formalities of courtly politics found in the letters and memoirs of people who lived and worked at court identify the features of courtly talk that were most important to the participants. This talk took place at and around the levees of powerful men and women. Just as republican political life is often imagined through the ideal of public debate in a space modeled on the Roman forum, courtly political life was imagined through the ideal of elegant conversation in a levee.

The goal of any conversation at the levee of a powerful man or woman was to get positive attention, or "favor." This was done through displaying "ease" and "parts," so that the king, minister, or favorite was charmed, amused, or helped out of a difficulty. Favor was displayed physically and orally by the patron. Successful courtiers were, as the second Earl Waldegrave put it in his memoir, "caress’d in the most public manner; and were honor’d with all the nonsense of gracious smiles, mysterious Nods, and endless Whispers, in every corner of the Drawing Room."5 Waldegrave was less apt to describe such favors as "nonsense" when he was receiving them himself rather than watching others receive them. Such displays of favor could be turned, eventually, into material favors: offices with pensions or sinecures, release from onerous duties, marriages for daughters, beneficial tariff measures. Because the rewards of favor could be so great, the levees of important people were often thronged. Everyone in the room looked closely at the ease and parts being displayed and judged the amount of favor they seemed to be generating. Knowledge about favor was called "information," and it was traded intensively among a group of people who often referred to themselves as "the world." If ease and parts failed, there was one other way of influencing the decisions of the powerful. People with many allies in powerful families could generate "clamour," an echoing sound of complaint that could be heard on many tongues in many rooms around the city. Even a king or prime minister could be influenced by an argument or claim that was made repeatedly by a large enough coalition.

The letters and diaries kept by men and women who frequented the court use the terms "favor," "clamour," and "we hear" with great frequency and some care. In November 1760, for instance, George Grenville, a
The letters and diaries kept by men and women who frequented the court use the terms "favor," "clamour," and "we hear" with great frequency and some care. In November 1760, for instance, George Grenville, a Member of Parliament and the Treasurer of the Navy, received a letter from Charles Jenkinson, a less influential man who often helped Grenville by providing him with political information. Jenkinson wrote, "I hear that Lord George Sackville has been at court, and that the King was civil to him. I have much to say to you on this head, which has, I find, already created a clamour, and may possibly create still more, which makes me extremely sorry for it." This bit of gossip was meaningful to Grenville because it made use of familiar terms through which the King communicated with his courtiers and those courtiers communicated with their allies and opponents. King George III, newly crowned that November, was making his interests and preferences clear. He was not a supporter of the Seven Years' War, and he chose to communicate his sentiments by being "civil" to Sackville, who had been court-martialed for refusing to attack in the battle of Minden.

The ministers who had carried on the war under the previous king, George II, correctly read the new King's cordiality to Sackville as a gesture of independence from them. The "clamour" was their orchestrated response, a collection of complaints, whispers, conjectures, and denunciations at dinner tables and coffeehouses around the city that would show George III the strength of their group. By beginning the passage with "I hear" rather than quoting an individual speaker, Jenkinson suggested that this "clamour" was beginning to gain strength, taking on a life outside a particular conversation. The information in Jenkinson's letter would allow Grenville to join in the "clamour" or to plan a response to it.

Jenkinson's assurance about what constituted important information, how that information was circulated, and how to name and understand the audience for it, came from his familiarity with the court world's complex system for circulating and interpreting information. The correspondences of Horace Walpole, Edmund Burke, the Grenvilles and Temples, and others involved in court and government in the eighteenth century provide frequent examples of the use of "I hear," "clamour," and "information" according to these conventions.

Turning from manuscript to newspaper writing, we can identify the same conventions in operation. Newspapers reported what "we hear" and what "is said," not only because those are familiar ways of indicating communication but because such hearing and saying were themselves news. If a powerful person's civility was a sign of an impending change in policy, as George III's civility to Sackville was, then what was heard near the centers of power, even in social conversation, was important information for anyone interested in war and peace, taxation, trade, or offices. If repeated comments constituted "clamour," and "clamour" was a demonstration of power by one alliance or another, then what was heard, and especially what was heard more than once, was important information for anyone trying to make plans based on who might be in what office in the future.

In making this argument, I am examining a tension that has been noticed by several scholars of the eighteenth-century press and politics. As Jeremy Black has put it, although scholars no longer write "political history that explains everything simply in terms of the activities of the Duke of Newcastle and five others," the political writing of important ministers and members of Parliament tends to ignore public opinion almost entirely. Readers of eighteenth-century papers are often struck by the growing vigor of popular political life in this period and the irrelevance of that life to the day-to-day running of the state by a small elite. Hannah Barker points out that "the public" was often addressed and discussed by the period's newspaper writers but was not seen as a revolutionary political force: "[T]hese individuals were thought to have a legitimate interest in the public affairs of their nation, which they could pursue and express without challenging the broad constitutional structures within which they lived." She identifies an effective and self-conscious public opinion expressed in newspapers quite late in the century, "between 1779 and 1785," at which point weekly newspapers had been familiar in London for 70 years and cheap, printed, political comment for closer to one hundred. Mid-century newspapers make interesting reading precisely because they suggest how contemporaries understood and negotiated the apparent conflict between a vibrant popular political culture and that culture's practical separation from political structures.

Although London newspapers were available to a socially and geographically wide readership, they frequently reported on levees, balls, and other scenes of aristocratic display. Often the news columns began with paragraphs such as these, from the London Chronicle for 22 January 1767:

Last night the Duchess of Northumberland had a great rout at Northumberland House. Invitations were given to above four hundred of the Nobility.
Last night the Duchess of Northumberland had a great rout at Northumberland House. Invitations were given to above four hundred of the Nobility.

Yesterday the Earl of Tyrone arrived at his house in Pali-Mall, from Ireland.

His Grace the Duke of Bedford yesterday distributed to the poor sort of people in Covent Garden 50 l. by the hands of the Lessee of the said market.

In each case, these events are newsworthy because they demonstrate the power and influence of courtly figures and the constellations of loyalty and attachment that surround them.

When important events took place around the court, the pace and volume of such reports increased dramatically. A change of ministries, during which one set of men resigned their places and all the patronage that went with them, and another took them on, could fill reams of letters and weeks of newspaper columns. Ministries changed frequently between 1760 and 1770, sending members of important families such as the Temples, Grenvilles, and Devonshires back and forth from rural exile to urban importance with dizzying speed. Their dependents, servants, and tradespeople gossiped and watched the newspapers for information on which to base their own strategies and decisions. A paragraph in the London Chronicle of 25 July 1765 commented on this situation by describing a new edition of the court calendar, which listed all officials and their offices. The new edition, the writer quipped, "will be published on Asses Skin, for the convenience of rubbing out and replacing of names; since the printed lists will be useless, if not renewed once a month at least." This newspaper writer does not make much of prints replicability and ephemerality, as historians of print have done. Instead, the paragraph treats a printed copy of the calendar as a semi-permanent record. Ass's skin serves the satirical purpose of relating jackasses and politics, of course. But it also suggests that the changing fortunes of families and factions were difficult to capture in writing. The offices were fixed and immutable, but the officeholders were frequently rubbed out and replaced.

The summer of 1765 provides a particularly revealing example of newspaper reporting on such courtly events. After months of conflict between the King and his first minister, Grenville, a new ministry was put together in July. The Duke of Grafton and the Marquess of Rockingham were in; Grenville was out. The crowds flowed to the levees of the newly powerful, leaving the members of the former ministry to retire to their country seats with only their closest allies. The London section of the London Chronicle for 25 July 1765 began with the following paragraphs:

We are told that on the first rumour of the late changes, a celebrated Commoner wrote a letter to a great Lawyer, which was to the following purport or tenor.

"Sir, I am informed that you are shortly to be removed from your office, and it is reported that I am the adviser of your removal-I deny it. On the contrary, did the circumstances of the times allow me to take a post in the administration, I would think myself happy in the assistance of a person, in that high office, of your experience and abilities. I am, Sir, &c."

It is said that the Secretary to ---- is a strongly suspected Roman Catholic. His brother was a known Papist, and in the late rebellion.

It is reported that when the new M --- y was settling, the D. of N. told the M. of R. that he must be F--st L- of the T. His Lordship objected on account of his inexperience. "It does not signify, my Lord, (replied his G---) F--st L--- of the T. you must be. Care will be taken to appoint proper persons to assist your Lordship in the business of your department; and as to the disposal of the places in your Lordship's power, if you think you are not qualified there, I am ready to undertake that part of your office myself."

The typographical emphases and evasions of this passage, which make it almost opaque to a twenty-first century reader, referred directly, for an eighteenth-century reader, to a series of voices repeating political information. The dashes and nicknames serve partly to protect the printer from libel charges. But they also serve to mark insider knowledge and provide readers with opportunities for showing off their interpretive skills. William Pitt, the "Great Commoner," was known throughout the nation, and many people had hoped he would accept a post in the new administration. Coffeehouse or tea-table readers could fill in the blanks, identifying Pitt and reconstructing the Duke of Newcastle's conversation with the Marquess of Rockingham.
skills. William Pitt, the "Great Commoner," was known throughout the nation, and many people had hoped he would accept a post in the new administration. Coffeehouse or tea-table readers could fill in the blanks, identifying Pitt and reconstructing the Duke of Newcastle's conversation with the Marquess of Rockingham about taking the office of First Lord of the Treasury.

The paragraph describing the letter from Pitt combines genres and media in a precise and layered way. It begins by claiming to report what "we are told." This report, in other words, has reached the offices of the London Chronicle through unnamed channels. The paragraph then quotes from a private letter, written in manuscript for an individual reader, and it does so using quotation marks. These would, in a twenty-first-century newspaper, indicate that the writer had copied directly from the manuscript, and that the copy had been checked. Here, however, the quotation marks identify the manuscript letter with the voice of the writer. They do not claim to indicate accuracy, since the entire paragraph reports only what "we are told" and conveys a general "purport or tenor" rather than a specific set of facts.

The "great lawyer" referred to in this paragraph was probably Fletcher Norton, described by one historian as "a lawyer noted for his vigour and his naked ambition," who was dismissed from his office as attorney general on 19 July 1765.13 It was in Norton's interest to inform the political world that Pitt, then the most popular of the possible ministers, supported him. His dismissal might then be seen as a side effect of Grenville's dispute with the King rather than as a reflection on Norton's abilities or connections. Publishing an account of such a personal letter of support would extend the common practice of showing letters around among one's friends and acquaintances. This practice mirrored that of passing around accounts of the distribution of favor at court. (A complementary episode can be found in the discussions of Samuel Johnson's letter rejecting the patronage of Lord Chesterfield. This letter has been lost, but it was discussed so often by the friends of both men that Johnson was prevailed upon to dictate a version from memory years later.)14

A newspaper paragraph reporting a rumor about a private letter written in response to a rumor, then, provided valuable and interesting political information. Its accuracy would be measured by other rumors, by the flow of carriages and crowds from one levee to another, and by the eventual makeup of the new ministry.

The next paragraph in the passage reports on what "is said" rather than what "we are told." By omitting reference to any particular listener as well as to any particular speaker, the paragraph bases its authority upon the claim that such conversation is general. Rather than claiming to have access to an eyewitness, the paper claims to report what is available everywhere (in certain privileged circles). The suspected Roman Catholic was probably Edmund Burke, newly hired as secretary to the Marquess of Rockingham. In the following weeks, the London Chronicle printed several defenses of Burke, still unnamed, as a gentleman with a high reputation in the literary world and a strong Protestant education.15 A suspicion of Catholicism could weaken Rockingham's coalition as members of parliament considered whether to support his ministry.

The last of these paragraphs is also critical of the new ministry. By reporting on what the Duke of Newcastle might have said to the Marquess of Rockingham, who was young and inexperienced but who was gaining access to enormous sources of patronage through the dismissal of men like Norton and those who worked under them, the paragraph provided opportunities to suspect these two men and the entire system of patronage. Historians have associated such a suspicion of the court and of placeholders with a "country" ideology as opposed to a courtly one. This paragraph does make information available in a form useful for an anti-court critique—how terrible it is, one could easily respond, that all these great men care about is distributing places. What about the business of the nation? If that is performed by underlings, why do these great men receive pensions for their offices?

Notice, however, that the form of this final paragraph matches the others very closely. It is framed as a reported speech, perhaps overheard and then retold in quotation marks. The italics mark the emphases not of the original speech but of the critical hearer retelling the story. It is the reporter who wants readers to notice that "places" seem more important than the "business" of the department for these speakers. There are, then, not two but at least three voices represented in the passage. And the critique does not propose, as an alternative to conversations between the Duke and the Marquess, a reasonable debate about the general good. Instead, it raises, obliquely, the possibility of damaging the reputations of both the Duke and the Marquess by suggesting that they are not as devoted to their independence as aristocrats should be.

As a group, these paragraphs report on a rumor about a private letter, a rumor about a suspicion, and an anecdote about a conversation. Each paragraph measures the rising and falling values of reputations. Repeatedly, the paper makes political information comprehensible by presenting it in the form of conversations between courtly insiders. In this way, newspaper writers treated the patronage and inclinations of the great men in the public sphere.
As a group, these paragraphs report on a rumor about a private letter, a rumor about a suspicion, and an anecdote about a conversation. Each paragraph measures the rising and falling values of reputations.Repeatedly, the paper makes political information comprehensible by presenting it in the form of conversations between courtly insiders. In this way, newspaper writers treated the patronage and inclinations of powerful figures, and the shifting reactions of less powerful people toward that patronage and those inclinations, as models for all political events. Like the gossip heard in gaming and coffee houses and the "information" written in manuscript letters, news in these paragraphs circulated outward from the center where decisions were made, requests answered, and arrivals greeted either gracially or otherwise.

Newspapers consistently presented political information in such courtly terms during the first three quarters of the century. Even when reporting on events outside the houses of important people, newspapers often maintained the forms and coniwentions of paragraphs like those above, passing on what had been heard, said, and whispered. The Whitehall Evening Post for 10 January 1761 ran the following paragraphs:

We hear that the Government has contracted for 30,000 Ton of Shipping, which is to be got ready with all possible Dispatch, for the Service of an Expedition, which will shortly take Place.

We hear that two Bankers on Friday last, by Commission, bought into the New Subscription 140 0001.

Saturday the Duke and Duchess of Portland came to Town, from their Seat in Buckinghamshire.

Sunday the Earl of Pembroke, lately arrived from Germany, waited on his Majesty, and was received very graciously.

In this passage, the news that looks today like gossip, accounts of the movements of and relationships between celebrities like the Duke of Portland and the Earl of Pembroke, are not marked with a "we hear," while military and financial events are marked that way. Events that we can, with hindsight, associate with the growth of a new, market driven society and a financially and culturally powerful capitalist elite are in these paragraphs described in the same terms as courtly events. Information about the governments military plans and the city of London's financial responses is available and comprehensible through access to powerful figures. The rising and falling fortunes of Earls and Dukes and their dependents are in this way similar to the rising and falling of stocks or the victories and defeats of wartime.

News paragraphs frequently described information in oral terms, even when it was actually communicated in a manuscript letter to the printer and then in the printed newspaper itself, because the information was imagined through the image of the levee. An example of such deliberate use of oral terms can be found in a letter written to Henry Woodfall, the printer of the Public Advertiser, by the Earl of Sandwich. Dated 23 February 1773, the letter presents a paragraph for the newspaper:

Mr. Woodfall,

I shall be obliged to you if without mentioning my name or giving any hint where this comes from, you would, if possible, insert the underwritten paragraph in your paper of tomorrow. . .the fact with regards to the action is true. I am,

Your very humble Servant,

Sandwich

We hear that the Earl of Sandwich has caused an action to be brought against the printer of the London Evening Post of the 2nd of February, in order to vindicate his honour against the infamous falsehood contained in that paper.16

This manuscript letter, then, requests the printer to treat a piece of news as a "we hear" when it actually has been directly received from a reputable source. The Earl is engaging in the world of printed news and public opinion by reacting to misinformation printed in a newspaper through a lawsuit (rather than, for instance, challenging the printer to a duel). He participates in this arena of law and print, however, through a paragraph framed in the customary way, through the forms of heard and overheard news. In this way Sandwich's letter corresponds with the news paragraphs about the new ships ordered by the government and the Duke and Duchess of Portlands visit to town. News, according to this way of thinking, originates at a center of power and takes the form of an original oral exchange. That exchange is repeated in a widening circle of other conversations, in writing, and in print. This widening circle provided a conceptual frame for
Newsworthy events happened in many places, but news about them was described as originating at one center. Both the production and distribution of news are imagined, in these passages, using aural metaphors that misrepresent the newspapers' empirical situation. Newspapers were actually produced in several places in London, then sent out along the postal routes to other towns, where they were redistributed by news agents, hawkers, and coffeehouse and tavern owners. In many provincial towns, passages from the London papers were also selectively reprinted, juxtaposed with passages from international papers and accounts of local news. Distribution, then, can be seen as nodal-copies of papers fanned out from London, but provincial centers redirected and redistributed the papers themselves and their contents. There is a conflict between the actual distribution pattern of the papers and the metaphors for distribution used by their writers. News is framed, in the passages I have quoted and in many others, as originating in the West End of London and spreading out from there in a wave with a single center. The papers' distribution is not described as circulation but as amplification-an aural metaphor. "We hear" is an image rather than an empirical description of newspaper production and delivery at mid-century. The widespread use of this image suggests that despite its inaccuracy it served to make the abstract connections between distant actors, writers, and readers comprehensible.

Newspapers also modeled the forms through which their reading publics could discuss and respond to the news. Scholarly accounts of print culture have imagined these discussions among newspaper readers as the location of a new sort of political discussion: democratic, enlightened, rational. Habermas describes the discussion societies, salons, and coffeehouses where such conversation could be practiced as oriented toward the "town" rather than the "court." In these spaces, the debates "disregarded status altogether. The tendency replaced the celebration of rank with a tact befitting equals. [This tendency created a] parity on whose basis alone the authority of the better argument could assert itself against that of the social hierarchy and in the end carry the day." Such conversations, according to Habermas, became abstract rather than concrete. Government could be discussed in terms of the rule of law rather than of a particular king. Specific policies could be evaluated according to the light of reason, rather than according to the particular interests of factions or families. "Public debate was supposed to transform voluntas into a ratio that in the public competition of private arguments came into being as the consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all." Turning a voluntas, or will, into a ratio, or reasoned judgment, directed political work away from inclinations and toward general laws. To determine "what was practically necessary" in such a conversation, participants would be searching for the course of action in accord with natural laws such as those believed to govern the market, as well as the laws of reason. Such actions, because of their correspondence with impersonal laws, would serve "the interest of all" rather than the interest of any particular group or faction. Scholarship on print culture beginning with the work of Elizabeth Eisenstein has connected such discussions, in which all identities and interests are abstract, with print's capacity to decontextualize information by replicating it in the day's 100 or 1000 copies of a newspaper and circulating it to people outside the traditional oral networks of information exchange.

The terms Habermas uses are directly opposed to those governing conversations at a levee. Disregarding status, developing "tact," a language for exchanges among equals, and bestowing authority on "the better argument" rather than "the social hierarchy" would not be useful activities to someone trying to understand or affect events at court. They would be counterproductive, since the alliances and obligations structuring the social hierarchy provided the categories through which courtiers worked. That difference suggests, as Habermas points out, how radically new the concept of a public critique of the state could be. The newspaper paragraphs examined above, however, suggest that as late as 1765 many writers in manuscript and in print described coffeehouse culture as an extension of the levee rather than an alternative to it. Waldegrave commented that it was impossible to spread misinformation about what had happened at court. "It would have been absurd to have denied those things, which might be seen at every Drawing Room, and were the subject of conversation at every Coffee House." This comment assumes that the material for conversation at "every" coffeehouse in town came from the events that had taken place at the most recent Drawing Room, as the king or prince displayed favor. Newspaper writers revealed a similar assumption when they reported upon what was heard and whispered, and upon the levees of important people. Such reports assumed that their readers were interpreting information according to forms derived from courtly, rather than rational, models of political information.
upon what was heard and whispered, and upon the levees of important people. Such reports assumed that their readers were interpreting information according to forms derived from courtly, rather than rational, models of political information.

Although it was a commonplace that in Britain one could walk into a coffeehouse and find anyone from a prince to a cobbler discussing politics, the terms of that discussion were confined, in many mid-century newspaper reports, to speculation and conjecture. For example, the Public Advertiser's London news for 15 January 1765 included paragraphs reporting that

It is whispered about the West End of the Town, that the people employed in demolishing the Fortifications of Dunkirk have lately been discharged from that Work.-A Circumstance which must occasion some Speculation.

We hear the intended Marriage of the Hereditary Prince of Denmark with her Royal Highness Princess Louisa of England will soon open a Negotiation for certain new Treaties of Commerce and Defence, between the Courts of Copenhagen and London, of the utmost Benefit to their respective Subjects, and in which a third Maritime Power on the Continent will be invited to join.

The fortifications at Dunkirk were seen as indices of French intentions to resume hostilities or remain at peace after the end of the Seven Years' War. They were rebuilt and demolished many times in the London newspapers in the years following the Peace of Paris. The news about the forts reported here is not only heard but overheard. The paragraph reports upon a whisper in a particular part of town, the West End, closest to the sources of information. It is important to note that this news does not come directly from Dunkirk itself, the location a twenty-first-century reader might expect to provide the best information. For an eighteenth-century reader, the West End of London was a much better source of information because it was physically nearer to powerful people. A reader with information from that part of town was part of a circle of information centered on the king. The whisper in the newspaper provides readers with the illusion of being let in on a secret in the presence of others. This paragraph, then, has the same form as the scene described by Waldegrave, where favorites are whispered to and caressed in every corner of the drawing room. This paragraph borrows the gestures of confidence and exclusion from court etiquette, casting the reader in the role of a courtier present in the drawing room but at a distance from the powerful figure. In such a place, the reader must observe behavior, attend to whispers, and speculate upon the meaning of the display. The reference to the unnamed "third Maritime Power" plays a similar role-obliqueness gives the reader an opportunity for conjecture based on inside knowledge, or perhaps for a knowing smile or whisper of her own.

The role of such conjecture and speculation in the interpretation of news paragraphs is made explicit in some paragraphs that appeared in the London Chronicle for 18 July 1765. A particularly difficult change in ministries was taking place, and the country watched as the important players negotiated:

Thursday Lord Northington was sent for at two o'clock to St. James's. His Lordship was then upon the Bench at Lincoln's-Inn-Hall, which he immediately left. Various were conjectures.

His Lordship next day set out for his seat at the Grange.

Lord Northington was a trusted confidante of the King, working to put together a ministry the King would favor.22 Readers could use paragraphs like those about Lord Northington to supplement information about the King's dislike of Grenville, or about Pitt's refusal to take any office at all, and make more accurate, or at least more interesting, "conjectures" than their neighbors who had not read the papers. By reporting visits like Northington's to the King and conjectures upon them, the newspapers participated in this culture of court-watching. In doing so, they perpetuated a political culture in which the participation of ordinary people was restricted to conjectures upon the mysterious and fascinating events taking place at court. Political knowledge, when framed by these modes of discussion, was insider knowledge.

Alternative models of political discussion, such as rational deliberation about the public good or theoretical consideration of social contracts, are not acknowledged by these paragraphs. It is not surprising to find that the second Earl Waldegrave or the correspondents of Grenville did not write in terms Habermas would identify as characteristic of the bourgeois public sphere. A weekly paper like the London Chronicle, however, provided material for coffeehouse discussion; we might therefore expect to find its accounts of political events framed in Habermasian terms. The news about Lord Northington quoted above, however, is meaningful only because of his rank. To analyze the papers information about him in universalist terms, disregarding status, would require one to ignore almost all the information presented in the paragraphs. Information about Northington's loyalty to the King had to be understood in the context of his family's
meaningful only because of his rank. To analyze the papers information about him in universalist terms, disregarding status, would require one to ignore almost all the information presented in the paragraphs. Information about Northington's loyalty to the King had to be understood in the context of his family's marriages, alliances, and obligations, as well as his personal charm and sense of honor.

Wars and financial markets, however, could be discussed meaningfully in other ways. They are more general, "social" phenomena, the sort that according to Habermas required writers and speakers to call upon an abstract realm of reason and law outside the inclinations and histories of individuals. But these paragraphs and many others discuss the economy and the nation's foreign policy as if they too begin in a smile or frown in a drawing room and ripple outward. The "we hears" and "whispers" allowed newspaper writers to describe military and economic events as beyond the control of ordinary people, whose participation is rhetorically constructed in the form of conjecture and reaction. The Public Advertiser for 3 May 1765 included the following paragraphs:

We hear an Account of the various Merchandize in the Island of Jersey and Guernsey, subject to the Duties of the Customs and Excise upon their being landed in Great Britain will speedily be ordered for Inspection, previous to certain Resolutions now on the Carpet, respecting the future Trade of both those Islands.

There is now a Talk that most of the Cutters lately taken into the Government's Service to cruise against the Smugglers, will be turned over to the immediate Direction of his Majesty's Officers of the Customs and Excise; by which a Savings of several Thousand Pounds per Annum will be made to the Nation.

Both of these paragraphs are framed by the tags indicating rumor: "We hear" and the vaguer "There is now a Talk." This news, unlike the paragraphs about the Marquess of Buckingham's personal secretary or the Duchess of Northumberland's ball, concerns the actions of the customs and excise bureaucracy. The interest of this information is in the "savings" which will be made "to the nation." This is the language of the general good. Such paragraphs suggest the window through which readers and writers might have begun to glimpse possibilities for new and different forms of public political discussion. Keeping track of the actions and arguments of elected representatives differs from watching the maneuvers of courtiers. The writer of these paragraphs considers the expenditures of "his Majesty's officers" as savings "to the Nation," rather than savings simply to his Majesty.

This nod to the general good opens, however, with familiar oral tags. And both of these paragraphs report actions that were being taken by the state: merchandise "will speedily be ordered for Inspection," cutters "will be turned over." These actions of the state are presented as unalterable moves to which readers can react, moving their merchandise out of Jersey or hiding their smuggled goods, rather than as policies available for public discussion. Alternative arguments are not suggested or implied by the form of the paragraphs. Coffeehouse discussions of these paragraphs, then, might just as easily be imagined in the familiar forms of courtly gossip as in the rational form described by Habermas.

Two years later, such juxtapositions of economic news and courtly forms were still routine. The London Chronicle for 5 May 1767 reported:

This evening their Majesties go to Drury-lane Theatre to see The School for Lovers, with Lethe, in which Mr. Garrick performs Lord Chalkstone.

We hear that his Excellency the Earl of Bristol will set out in a few days for Parkgate, where a King's yacht now lyes ready to carry his Lordship and his train for Dublin.

This day was held a great board of Trade and Plantations; at which some Merchants trading to the Muskito shore, and other Colony Agents, attended.

This morning his grace the Duke of Grafton had a numerous Levee at Whitehall.

The Board of Trade was made up of the ministers who administered the British Empire. Here, merchants whose profits and interests would shape the economic and political future of America and of the empire "attend" upon the ministers who make policy. The difficult questions of internal and external taxation, of slavery and disease, and of market expansion associated with trading to the Mosquito Coast go unmentioned. The Duke of Grafton's numerous levee, however, merits its own paragraph.

Such reporting was hardly an intentional conspiracy of aristocratic elites bracing against a capitalist,
The Duke of Grafton’s numerous levees, however, merits its own paragraph.

Such reporting was hardly an intentional conspiracy of aristocratic elites bracing against a capitalist, bourgeois, print-based future. Both the courtiers and the newspaper writers were going about their day-to-day business, using familiar terms, institutions, and technologies and adapting new methods as they became available. Reporting political news in terms of rumor and conjecture did, however, perpetuate a concept of political discourse that channeled public discussion. Neither conjecture nor rumor provided tools for determining the “authority of the better argument,” in Habermass terms. Instead, newspapers extended and amplified the circles of talk surrounding the daily political events of the Georgian court. They allowed readers to “overhear” the whispers and reports that constituted political information among the people who surrounded the King, and they provided those readers with ample material for speculation and conjecture.

University of Southern Maine

Footnote

NOTES


2 Studies specifically examining British newspapers have revealed the difficulties of making broad claims about their cultural effects in the face of fragmentary evidence about how the papers were produced and consumed. In his account of political news in eighteenth-century papers, Jeremy Black has claimed that, rather than presenting a critical audience before which the ancien régime state was forced to legitimate itself, as Habennas argued, the newspapers simply provided new space for the conduct of political business as usual. “In many senses the press and the amorphous pressures, interests and opinions understood by the term public opinion were part of the political system itself” (The English Press in the Eighteenth Century [Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1987], 115). He calls for more research and is skeptical of farreaching historical narratives in its absence.


7 Grenville Papers, 1:357.

8 Black, 117.


10 Public opinion did influence political events during the century: protests over excise under Walpole, suspicion of John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute as first minister, and support for John Wilkes all had practical effects on state actions. These effects were not achieved through representative structures, however, but through mob and crowd actions, often seen as "complaint" or "clamour." For a more complete account of popular political life and its relation to virtual representation, see John Brewer, Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), and Kathleen Wilson, The

http://search.proquest.com/printviewfile?accountid=13698
through mob and crowd actions, often seen as "complaint" or "clamour." For a more complete account of popular political life and its relation to virtual representation, see John Brewer, Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976), and Kathleen Wilson, The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism in England, 1715-1785 (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995).

11 For social and geographical distribution of readership, see Barker, Newspapers, Politics, and English Society, 61. Evidence in my article is drawn entirely from London newspapers. Recent work has suggested that newspapers in the provinces, both English and American, differed in significant ways from those in the metropolis. Although provincial editors made up most of each issue from reprints of material from London papers, the selections were often determined by local interests and issues. see Barker, Newspapers, Politics, and English Society, 104-14; C. Y. Ferdinand, Benjamin Collins and the Provincial Newspaper Trade in the Eighteenth Century (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); and G. A. Cranfield, The Development of the Provincial Newspaper (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1962). The language of "we hear" and "clamour" was certainly available and familiar to provincial readers. Charles E. Clark, discussing provincial papers in America, describes newspapers' address to their readers, as I have above, in terms of widened access to a privileged center: "[B]y broadening access to current information and by dignifying in print the familiar concerns of everyday life, the newspapers offered a kind of open communion; ordinary readers were invited to share with a previously privileged circle in the ritual of communal identity in which one participated by reading the news" (The Public Prints: The Newspaper in AngloAmerican Culture, 1665-1740 [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994], 11).


15 See London Chronicle, 1 August 1765 and 6 August 1765.

16 Letters to H.S. Woodfall, 1763-1799, BL, Add. MSS 27780, f21. The Post had published a letter claiming that Sandwich had tried to sell an Admiralty Commissioner's post. A jury awarded damages to Sandwich. see Rea, 220.

17 See Barker, Newspapers, Politics, and English Society, 40-41, 104, 106, 112-14, and Black, 35-37.

18 Habermas, 36.

19 Habermas, 83.


21 Waldegrave, 181.

22 See The Correspondence of King George the Third From 1760 to December 1783, ed. John Fortescue, 6 vols. (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1967), 1:104-18 for another view of these events.