



**Uriel Heyd.** *Reading Newspapers: Press and Public in Eighteenth-Century Britain and America.* Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2012. Illustrations. xii + 302 pp. \$102.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7294-1042-7.



**Reviewed by** Eugenia M. Palmegiano (St. Peter's University)

**Published on** Jhistory (October, 2012)

**Commissioned by** Heidi Tworek (University of British Columbia)

### The Press: Its Readers and Writers

Press historians conventionally situate the press as a major player in society, shaping as well as echoing readers' views. But readers are the most elusive component in any investigation of periodicals that predate audience surveys. Who read what and why often remain queries unanswered or answered with shaky evidence. *Reading Newspapers* widens knowledge of readership by providing audience data from traditional and nontraditional sources. Even more important are the book's transnational approach and space/time constructions. The geographic format reveals commonalities and distinctions between two English-speaking newspaper environments. Construing space/time as fluid underscores the dangers of setting rigid boundaries when reader reception of papers determines here/now and there/before-after and confirms that "what's new(s)" depends as much on who is inquiring as on who is responding.

Attention to audience begins in a lengthy introduction, which describes newspapers as "early branded consumer products sensitive to popular taste and market fluctuations" (p. 3). Notwithstanding this nod to merchandising, Uriel Heyd elects to focus less on newspapers' organization, production, and distribution than the news culture they fostered. To support his claim that the press became an actual presence in individual lives and a virtual one in the public milieu, he relies on four kinds of writings with different time frames. Newspaper introductions are futuristic; plays, current or almost so; indexes, looking back; and book auction catalogues featuring newspapers looking farther back. These sources from both sides of the Atlantic and from about 1695 through the 1820s incorporate the thinking of press insiders and outsiders. Interwoven with this material are the analyses of prominent media scholars, among them Jeremy Black, James Carey,

David Copeland, Michael Harris, and David Paul Nord.

In an exercise of introspection, chapters 1 and 2 concentrate on the prospectus. Manifestos come about equally from London and the American East Coast, with sixty discussed of the hundred checked. Heyd shows that a paper's goals implied its anticipated readership by promising to address specific needs and encouraging responses. Although introductions targeted the potential buyer (in whatever mode), they exhibit the greatest disparity in the book's references. Mainstream British gazettes, with more competition, recognized the growing desire for fast dissemination of information, proposed political impartiality or partiality to counter the bias of others, and pictured themselves by mid-century as crucial to satisfy business needs for promptness and advertising venue. Such aims clearly discounted illiterates and semiliterates, those served by an autodidact, or those susceptible to the unstamped papers allegedly manipulating them. The Americans stressed freedom of the press, which understandably changed its meaning pre- and post-revolution. They pictured the newspaper as the hub of an emerging community akin to those Scots who also favored a break from London. And the Americans noticed women as a significant audience segment. Otherwise, the Atlantic press did not deviate so much, as plans to teach and amuse demonstrate. Whether these objectives sprang from notions about Enlightenment rationality, bourgeois morality, class mobility, or scandal-ridden familiarity, they suggest that publishers intended to extend talk beyond the neighborhood. And here apparently newspapers succeeded, catalyzing conversations in clubs, coffee houses, and pub--where place connoted status more in Britain than the colonies. But, as Heyd points out, luring consumers was not necessarily difficult when newspaper junkies and inquisitive readers piqued by anonymity would peruse anything.

The review of newspaper indexes in chapter 3 closely studies indexes of two London papers and one Boston reader, Harbottle Dorr, earlier scrutinized by historian Bernard Bailyn.[1] Heyd delineates, complete with graphs, the *London Chronicle* and *Lloyd's Evening Post* in selected years, 1758-95, and, with pictures of Dorr's annotations, his four volumes of various bound newspapers, 1765-73, including the short span when they were very politically spirited. While Heyd concedes that unnamed indexers chose London content, he ranks their entries and Dorr's based on percentage of appearance. Hence "foreign news," "politics," and "commercial information" were "major" topics in the London papers (pp. 124-125). "Dorr's taxonomy" prioritized the Stamp tax, the nonimportation agreements, politics/ politicians, and colonial towns. Oddly, the London indexes in a bigger newspaper center paid less heed than Dorr to press commentary on the press and to letters, which validated readers' right to input. Alternatively, each index unsurprisingly listed health, a universal reader experience, and reflected the demand for eyewitness battlefield accounts. Heyd occasionally vacillates, speculating on the one hand that *Gazette* and *Post* reporting of "poor issues ... hints at non-middling sort of readership" and on the other that paternalism or anxiety about the lower class probably drove these items (p. 143). To Heyd, the index guided readers to what they should remember. By expanding space beyond a single paper, it ordered facts across borders, thus diminishing parochialism but skewed perspective. By expanding time beyond a single date, the index could make the ephemeral eternal but confuse time by conflating the when of publishing and of reading. Still, he maintains, the index created common memory out of separate copies that had previously spun or unraveled momentary opinions.

Removed from the traditional documentation in press history, chapter 4 elucidates how the theater portrayed the newspaper world. Drawing from an abundance of plays, principally British,

Heyd does not ignore the real relationship between stage and press, one in which advertising was the reward for good reviews. Likewise linking the intentionally fictive production and the purportedly factual newspaper was their sensitivity to the latest happening or craze. Yet the press did not fare well on stage, accused of deterring serious reading, lying to gullible readers, and hiring societal spies. If scripts mirror eighteenth-century newspapers, then their readers were women fishing for gossip, traders hunting for threats of war and power brokers for threats of riot, rustics seeking diversion, and snoops tracking celebrities.

Categorization of readers, by gender, occupation, residence, or curiosity, does not apply to the group discussed in chapter 5, entitled “*Quidnunc*: The Obsessive Reader.” The chapter considers this character, lampooned onstage and symbolized offstage by Dorr. The *quidnunc*, from any class and either sex, reputedly preferred politics to the personal. By examining everything connected to power, Heyd posits, the *quidnunc* leveled the field so that all information was equal and theoretically equally accessible, thereby paving the way for the “street politician” and democratization (pp. 207-208). The first horrified British “haves”; the second inspired revolution-minded colonials, whom Dorr typified. Why he merits two separate assessments, Heyd asserts, is that his glosses on newspapers are as useful as his index. Expecting to pen a narrative of the American Revolution, which he staunchly supported, he regarded newspapers as “authoritative and accurate historical sources” (p. 223). He decoded their satires, unveiled some anonymous contributors, and supplemented many pieces, clarifying them or putting them in context with intelligence from elsewhere. If his initial remarks were emotional, his later observations were deliberative if partisan, countering opposition opinion. Consequently, his is the premier example of reader interaction with the press.

Dorr represented the consummate active reader in contrast to the newspaper collector, the subject of chapter 6, who seems the most inactive. Pending more data about Heyd’s shadowy sellers from the gentry, clergy, medicine, and law, Dorr in another guise and Thomas Jefferson are the best exceptions offered to the rule of passivity. Employing book auction catalogues from London, Edinburgh, and the colonies, Heyd concludes that catalogues verify what readers deemed worthy of preserving. The British earmarked primarily political papers, such as the *London Gazette* and its enemies. In addition, cultural rather than financial value may have motivated accumulating originals. On both Atlantic coasts the publications of Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Samuel Johnson, and John Wilkes were popular due to content and style. But this estimate is problematic since American statistics are scarcer, and Americans were notoriously suspicious of British propaganda.

Summarizing his audience profile, Heyd credits newspapers for developing a genuinely interactive medium wherein the reader learned, learned to think and then to remember. These political lightning rods, savvy businesses in the forefront of advertising, cultural forums, and social networkers met foes who criticized their sway in governance and their destabilization of society. But this eighteenth-century encounter was only the first charge in the still-raging battle about the role of the press.

To its advantage, the book has footnotes on each page and an extensive bibliography of secondary materials, laudable for its range of citations but for a few outdated ones. The bibliography indicates a broad geographic scope of research, from the Virginia Historical Society to the National Library of Scotland, and a similarly broad intellectual one, naming seventy-two London newspapers, seventy-four American ones, and eighty plays. Complementing this evidentiary trail are three appendices with Dorr’s biography and explanations of criteria for inclusion in the in-

dexes in chapter 3. Unfortunately, references to auction catalogues are not by caption but by location held. And this book is no easy read because of Heyd's tendency to repeat arguments as a means to buoy them. Nonetheless, the volume's assets outweigh its liabilities.

#### Note

[1]. Bernard Bailyn, "The Index and Commentaries of Harbottle Dorr," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 85 (1973): 21-35.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

**Citation:** Eugenia M. Palmegiano. Review of Heyd, Uriel. *Reading Newspapers: Press and Public in Eighteenth-Century Britain and America*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. October, 2012.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36378>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.