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Newspapers, Politics and Public Opinion in the Later Hanoverian Era

KARL W. SCHWEIZER

The concurrence of expanding readership, increased circulation, party conflict and international tensions during the later Georgian age led to renewed emphasis on the newspaper press as a critical organ of public opinion.¹ Crises abroad or overseas, especially, were conducive to heightened press debate – the American and French revolutionary wars being prime examples of phases during which intensified press activity, evoking government vigilance and rebuttal, were evident: current affairs constituting a major topic of public and ministerial controversy throughout this period.

Indeed, long a central component of the political system, the eighteenth-century press casts particular light on the pressures and ideas influential in the formulation of foreign/military policy and its articulation by parliament – the constitutional body responsible for providing the funds upon which the implementation of all government initiatives depended.² Here the importance of the press – whether newspaper, magazine or pamphlet – was manifested in two ways: first in creating a climate of opinion which shaped foreign views of British intentions and capabilities; secondly, in affecting the views held on foreign developments by the nation, irrespective of rank or connexion, thereby ensuring governmental impact and response. As such, the press – by broadening the forum for the public discussion of political affairs – altered the context in which decisions were made and so, ultimately, changed the complex balance of socio-political relations that had made Hanoverian Britain more an integral part of Europe's *ancien régime* rather than a liberal aberration from it.³

For most contemporaries it is precisely data extracted from newspapers which made possible 'any kind of informed political debate; the essential prerequisite for

¹ For comprehensive introductions to both the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century press see: *Newspaper History. From the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day*, ed. G. Boyce, J. Curran and P. Wingate (1978); J. Black, *The English Press in the 18th Century* (1987); M. Harris, *London Newspapers in the Age of Walpole* (1974); R. R. Rea, *The English Press in Politics, 1760–1774* (Lincoln, Neb., 1963); E. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an agent of Change* (Cambridge, 1973); H. Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and Public Opinion in late 18th Century Georgian England* (Oxford, 1998).

² B.L. Add MS 58856, ff. 34–35: Grenville to Auckland, 4 Dec. 1792; cf. J. Black, 'Parliament and Foreign Policy, 1763–93', *Parliaments, Estates and Representation*, XIII (1993), 153–71; *idem*; *A System of Ambition? British Foreign Policy 1660–1793* (1991), ch. 3.

³ M. Peters, 'Historians and the 18th Century Press: A Review of Possibilities and Problems', *New Zealand Journal of History and Politics*, XV (1987), 41; B. Harris, *Politics and the Rise of the Press. Britain and France 1620–1800* (1996), p. 30; P. Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishmen, 1689–1789* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 35–54; cf. B. Harris, 'Praising the Middling Sort? Social Identity in 18th Century Newspapers', in *The Making of the British Middle Class? Studies of Regional and Cultural Diversity*, ed. A. Kidd and D. Nicholls (Stroud, 1998).

the formation of opinion',⁴ and its concomitant impact on every level of political life. The press, too, after 1760, functioned as a potent stimulus to radicalism (of whatever colouration) newspapers enhancing political awareness among an ever-expanding readership, both metropolitan and provincial, along with wider notions of accountability and openness in governmental affairs.⁵

Given this expanding press influence, politicians – whether ministerial or oppositional – made concerted efforts to exploit if not control newspaper coverage – even though their efforts in this direction were limited by processes that had gathered force in the nearly half century interim. By the early 1790s, the newspaper press had won a series of legal and legislative privileges which made it a more vibrant institution; more independent, prosperous and respectable; a centre of unrestrained public discourse and critical component of a changing political world in which public opinion had acquired a pronounced and legitimate role.

Of further importance in shaping the eighteenth-century press was its contiguous relationship with significant socio-economic developments occurring at this time. Easily the most dramatic was the expansion of trade and industry – a buoyant commercial context – which multiplied the numbers and wealth of an entrepreneurial class with its distinctive ethos, interests and ambitions.⁶ Newspaper owners were themselves representatives of this enterprising cadre; newspapers coming to possess a dual character, being both profitable entities – reliant more on sales revenue, and advertising than subsidies – and vehicles for expressing and influencing the sentiments of the new moneyed class who comprised a vital segment of the reading public.⁷ This group's growing awareness of its enhanced economic status and its quest for commensurate political recognition gave their politics a decidedly liberal cast, a situation which could all too easily create complications for a conservative ministry.

In particular, London's distinctive municipal organization and broad franchise coupled with the socially diverse background of its newspaper readership,⁸ translated into chronic anti-government sentiments that stimulated appreciably the efforts of the press to gain greater independence from official influence, control, or restraint.

Because of the expanding commercialism during the century, a newspaper could attain both prosperity and a large measure of autonomy – chiefly through its advertising columns which in the early part of the century were first incorporated into the actual newsheet instead of, as previously, printed on separate advertising sheets. Many of

⁴ Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and Public Opinion*, p. 4; cf. H.T. Dickinson, *The Politics of the People in 18th Century Britain* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 204–5.

⁵ R. Spector, *Political Controversy. A Study in 18th Century Propaganda* (Westport, 1992), pp. vii–viii; N. Rogers, *Whigs and Cities. Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole* (Oxford, 1989).

⁶ P. Mathias, *The First Industrial Nation. An Economic History of Britain* (New York, 1969); C. Hyde, *Technological Change and the British Iron Industry 1700–1870* (Princeton, 1977); E. Brose, *Technology and Science in the Industrializing Nations 1500–1914* (Atlantic Highlands, 1998), pp. 23–45. For a post-revisionist view see: D. Fisher, *The Industrial Revolution. A Macroeconomic Interpretation* (1992).

⁷ J. Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), ch. 8; *Serials and their Reader*, ed. R. Myers and M. Harris (Winchester, 1993), pp. 107–14.

⁸ Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and Public Opinion*, 73–74. Cf. Susan Bran, 'Politics, Commerce and Social Policy in the City of London, 1782–1802', University of Oxford, D. Phil., 1992, pp. 72–84; J. Styles, 'Manufacturing, Consumption and Design in 18th Century England', in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. J. Brewer and R. Porter (1993) pp. 541–2.

these advertisements were clearly aimed at encouraging the consumerism of a growing London population, especially the proliferating, prosperous middle class. Not only was advertising lucrative through direct revenues; it also helped sell papers, often to individuals exclusively interested in commercial or entertainment features.

Advertisement in the leading London dailies tended to showcase items of interest to the well-to-do and educated, such as playbills, books and luxury goods: among them, fine wines, jewelry and fashionable clothes and leisure activities, including sports.⁹ Market conditions and commercial news also became a regular feature of particular interest to tradesmen, merchants and manufacturers. Newspaper proprietors were commercial entrepreneurs eager to promote, through their papers, the business of their subscribers as well as their own. The founding of newspapers, particularly before 1775, seems to have been motivated more by financial than political or ideological reasons.¹⁰ The structure of ownership was based on syndicates with 12 to 20 businessmen owning single shares of a paper. These individuals would affiliate with more traditional owners, such as printers, in sharing a paper and would also, in many instances, spread their investments among other papers.¹¹

By inserting their own advertisements along with others they were at once publicizing their businesses and providing an assured source of revenue for a paper. A good example of this type of arrangement was the *Morning Post* which, founded in 1772, numbered among its proprietors Christie, the auctioneer, Tattersall, the horse and carriage dealer, and John Bell, bookseller, all of whom regularly advertised in the paper. Bell, who was later to devote his attention to other aspects of the journalistic field, considered the *Post* primarily an instrument for the promotion of his bookselling business. Both publishers and subscribers came to realize that diversification meant access to a wider range of goods and services – all of interest to the newspaper reading public.¹²

Thus newspapers, which carried the heaviest volume of advertising, were the most profitable and as a result the ‘advertisers’ of the 1760s and 1770s such as the *Daily Advertiser*, the *Public Advertiser*, the *Gazetteer* and the *Public Ledger* were quite secure in their independence. Moreover, several provincial papers expanded their reportage by publishing related magazine-type pamphlets. ‘These benefited from the subscription base, distribution network and print facilities already provided by the newspapers.’¹³

One would assume that the official tax levied on advertising, beginning in 1712 at one shilling for each insertion and increased to three shillings by the 1790s, would have hampered the receipt of adequate income from this source. That this obstacle could be circumvented by simply increasing the rate charged to customers is illustrated

⁹ R.B. Walker, ‘Advertising in London Newspapers 1650–1750’, *Business History*, XV (1973), 120; *Serials and their Readers*, ed. Myers and Harris, p. 112–13.

¹⁰ S. Lutnick, *The American Revolution and the British Press* (Columbia, Miss., 1967), pp. 1–2; J. Black, *The English Press 1621–1861* (Stroud, 2001), pp. 42–4, 74; M. Harris, ‘The Management of the London Newspaper Press during the 18th Century’, *Publishing History*, IV (1978), 95–112.

¹¹ I. R. Christie, ‘English Newspapers in the later Georgian Age’, in *Myth and Reality* (Los Angeles, 1970), p. 315; Black, *The English Press 1621–1861*, pp. 58–9.

¹² W. Hindle, *The Morning Post 1772–1937* (1937), pp. 9–10; Black, *The English Press, 1621–1861*, p. 64.

¹³ Black, *The English Press, 1621–1861*, p. 51.

by the early example of the *London Courant*.¹⁴ It has been demonstrated that from 1770 to 1820, advertising duties rose from 2s. to 3s. 6d. but that general newspaper profits more than tripled. A factor in favour of the papers was that, while the advertisement tax remained the same regardless of the length of an advertisement, the rate charged to customers could be raised. Even after the trend towards shorter advertisements began, papers had an advantage in both a greater number and variety of advertising custom as well as receiving a stipulated minimum of 6s. even if an advertisement was only several lines in length resulting in increased profits and greater independence.¹⁵

The financial success of a newspaper could be traced to a reciprocal relationship between advertising and circulation: advertisements would attract readers while an established readership would attract still more advertising customers, resulting in increased profits. According to the records of the *Public Advertiser*, the paper's circulation increased by 80 per cent from 1765 to 1771 while its advertisements increased by over 42 per cent over the same period.¹⁶ Although this paper enjoyed a predominantly *élite* readership similar developments can be traced in other publications, such as the *Gazetteer*, whose subscribers were generally from a lower social class. Also important was the improvement of communication as the century progressed, road systems, postal services and carrying facilities becoming more extensive and economical, physically linking London papers with major towns in the provinces thus further increasing sales and revenues.¹⁷

This fiscal basis of newspaper stability lessened to a great extent the need for ministerial patronage and permitted the transmission of fair and accurate news to a receptive public. Unlike the libelous, inflammatory publications of an earlier period,¹⁸ the newspapers of the 1780s displayed a more definable political stance combined with greater interest in forming and accurately reflecting public opinions on major national issues – themes such as changes in suffrage and governance which, part of Britain's growing reform movement, broadened distribution both in the metropolis and the provinces. The average daily sale of London papers nearly doubled between the 1760s and 1770s as did that of select provincial papers such as the *Hampshire Chronicle* and the *Salisbury Journal*. A widened readership along with the milestone victory in 1772 of being permitted to openly report on parliamentary proceedings,¹⁹ allowed them to make the business of both Houses publicly accessible and fostered broader notions of accountability, lending a new panache to the newspaper press,

¹⁴ Walker, 'Advertising in London Newspapers', p. 119.

¹⁵ I. Asquith, 'Advertising and the Press in the Late 18th and Early 19th Centuries: James Perry and the *Morning Chronicle* 1790–1821', *Historical Journal*, XVIII (1975), 713.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 707; Brewer, *Party Ideology*, pp. 144–5.

¹⁷ Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and Public Opinion*, p. 27; Harris, *London Newspapers*, p. 14; Christine Ferdinand, 'Local Distribution Networks in 18th Century England', in *Spreading the Word. The Distribution Network of Print 1550–1850*, ed. R. Meyers and M. Harris (Winchester, 1990), pp. 131–49.

¹⁸ Harris, *London Newspapers*, p. 114.

¹⁹ P. D. G. Thomas, 'The Beginnings of Parliamentary Reporting in Newspapers, 1768–1774', *English Historical Review*, LXXIV (1959), 623–56; D. Wahrman, 'Virtual Representation: Parliamentary Reporting and Languages of Class in the 1790s', *Past and Present*, No. 136 (1992), 83–113; W. C. Lowe, 'Peers and Printers: The Beginnings of Sustained Press Coverage of the House of Lords in the 1770s', *Parliamentary History*, VII (1988), 241–56.

this in turn attracting higher level journalists and proprietors, in addition to further expanding sales and profits.²⁰

Daniel Stuart, a subsequent leader in responsible journalism, wrote that the *General Advertiser* of the 1770s drew substantial revenues from the very considerable space it allowed for advertising and never had more than a half a column of news. Yet by 1782 the *Town and Country Magazine* could claim 'The speeches and debates in both Houses of Parliament are of such importance, as to engross the greatest part of our newspapers, and necessarily become matters of the utmost consequence to all our readers.'²¹ The newspaper which perhaps made the greatest advance in enlightening public opinion was Henry Sampson Woodfall's *Public Advertiser*. Woodfall 'prided himself on the strict impartiality with which he opened his columns to all who gave or sold him matter worth printing and likely to interest or instruct the public'.²² It was Woodfall who between 1762 and 1772 published the famous letters to Junius which levelled bitter criticism at a reactionary tory government. He also, among other publishers, was able to dictate the terms if not contents of planted articles, expressly attributed to particular politicians, even aristocrats.²³

It would be mistaken to assume that proprietors necessarily shared all the sentiments which they elaborated in their papers or that the economic motive was being subordinated to the political. Henry Woodfall certainly did not himself subscribe to the radicalism of Junius, nor can he have been oblivious to the benefits accruing to the *Public Advertiser* as a result of the popularity of the letters.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that political commentary acquired renewed prominence especially during and after the American crisis. Because city businessmen owned most newspapers, the majority of the press tended to acquire a liberal orientation. The troubles with the American colonies – their resistance to British imperial authority – demonstrated afresh the unrepresentative nature of England's parliament, and in the process revived the longstanding debate about the pros and cons of the Revolution Settlement and the nature of the governmental system.²⁴ To the commercial and industrial classes, intent on wielding greater power in parliament, and desiring both tax and constitutional reform, this meant taking an anti-ministerial stance, a stance vigorously articulated in the newspaper press, as were the growing manifestations of popular protest equally linked to colonial discontent.²⁵

That opposition journalism tended to predominate is evident from the fact that North's ministry was only able to rally two major dailies to its side during the

²⁰ A. S. Collins, *Authorship in the Days of Johnson* (1927), pp. 255–6; Black, *The English Press, 1621–1861*, pp. 129–32.

²¹ D. Stuart, 'Anecdotes of Public Newspapers', *Gentleman's Magazine*, X (1838), p. 25; cf. *Town and Country Magazine*, XIV (1782), pp. iii–iv.

²² Aspinall, *Politics and the Press*, p. 343; cf. Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and Public Opinion*, pp. 44, 93.

²³ Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and Public Opinion*, p. 119; B.L., Add. MS 27780, ff. 20–1.

²⁴ On the older country ideology in which much of this debate was rooted see J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce and Society* (Cambridge, 1976); Linda Colley, *In Defiance of Oligarchy. The Tory Party 1714–1760* (Cambridge, 1982); H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property. Political Ideology in 18th Century Britain* (1977); P. S. Hicks, *Neo Classical History and English Culture* (New York, 1996).

²⁵ J. Sainsbury, 'The Pro-Americans of London 1769–1782', *William and Mary Quarterly*, XXXV (1978), 423–54.

Anglo-American conflict.²⁶ The reason in the case of both papers was the same: the editor, Reverend Henry Bate Dudley, a man given to frivolous, flamboyant tastes personally and journalistically. As editor of the *Morning Post* from 1772, he succeeded in subverting the anti-government bias of the paper after receiving a peerage and pension, a fact he freely (and cynically) admitted.²⁷ It was Dudley who, after being dismissed as editor of the *Post*, began the *Morning Herald* in 1780 which, with minor fluctuations, maintained a consistent pro-ministerial stance.

The colonists, conversely, were stridently supported by the Wilkite press, and that select group of radical intellectuals known as the 'Real Whigs' or 'Commonwealthmen',²⁸ who viewed Americans, like themselves, as victims of a tyrannical executive and blamed parliament exclusively for provoking colonial dissent. American intransigence, whatever its form, they saw as 'legitimate expressions of outraged virtue'.²⁹

More practically, the 'Real Whigs' forged liaisons with opposition papers, sponsored pro-American pamphlets and prints, and mobilized support for America in the turbulent world of London politics.³⁰ Moreover, printers such as John Almon readily publicized colonial grievances, radical city clubs provided forums for discussions sympathetic to the colonists and proved active in mobilizing opinion among the centres of metropolitan opposition to government, culminating in the election in 1775 of the Virginian lawyer, Arthur Lee, as alderman for Aldgate ward.³¹ Indeed the North ministry's American policy encountered its greatest resistance in London where the common council – roused by 'continual fire in the papers'³² – ultimately prepared a petition to the Commons attacking the New England Restraining Bill and roundly denounced all similar proposals affirming that American legislators were wholly justified in defying them.³³ In response, Dudley's efforts remained confined to reiterating the whiggish propriety of 'taxation without representation', a position unvaryingly proclaimed and defended in parliament by its spokesmen Grenville and North. At this level the debate remained uncompromisingly simple, centring on the underlying principles of divergent taxative plans and their constitutional rationale. Beyond this, and as promulgated by the popular press, 'lay a great range of legal,

²⁶ A third, the *Morning Chronicle*, for a time after 1778 gave its support to North, although reservedly. The *Chronicle* throughout the 1780s was generally regarded as oppositionist.

²⁷ Lutnick, *American Revolution*, p. 25; *Morning Post*, 24 Feb. 1780; Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and Public Opinion*, p. 46.

²⁸ On this group see: C. Robbins, *The 18th Century Commonwealthmen* (Cambridge, Mass. 1959); Arthur Sheps, 'The American Revolution and the Transformation of English Republicanism', *Historical Reflections*, II (1975), 3–28.

²⁹ Sainsbury, 'The Pro-Americans', p. 425; cf. *idem.*, *Disaffected Patriots. London Supporters of Revolutionary America* (Toronto, 1987). Also, J. E. Bradley, *Popular Politics and the American Revolution in England* (Macon, GA., 1986).

³⁰ Sainsbury, 'The Pro-Americans', pp. 426–7; C. Bonwick, 'An English Audience for American Revolutionary Pamphlets', *Historical Journal*, XIX (1976), 355–74.

³¹ A. Riggs, 'Arthur See and the Radical Whigs, 1768–1776', Yale University, Ph.D. 1967, pp. 113–35; C. Bonwick, *English Radicals and the American Revolution* (1977).

³² William Lee to Richard Henry Lee, 10 Sept. 1774, in *Letters of William Lee, 1766–1783*, ed. W. C. Ford (3 vols, New York, 1891), I, 91–2.

³³ Corporation of London R.O., Journal of Common Council, LXVI, ff. 170–5; *Morning Chronicle*, 22 Feb. 1775.

political even religious issues which led readily to the posing of basic ideological questions³⁴ – questions important for the development of British political thought and a subject of abiding controversy. Equally, British press criticism of the king and his ministers appears to have aroused bitter polemics in America as Gage observed in 1772 to the secretary of war, ‘your papers are stuffed with infamous paragraphs which the American printers especially those of Boston seldom fail to copy with American additions’.³⁵

That at-length opinion – except among the most diehard radicals – tended to shift more in favour of the ministry was not attributable to superior government propaganda, but due to the actual outbreak of war followed by America’s relentless progress towards independence, widely seen as a serious threat to the fundamental integrity of the British empire which now tainted the loyalty of all those associated with ‘colonial ingrates and deceivers’. It was after Burgoyne’s defeat at Saratoga that petitions to both king and Commons proliferated, blaming this calamity on North, calling for national unity and immediate peace with America ‘in order to prevent the commerce and strength of that country from being added to the crown of France’.³⁶ The potential of American complications for exploitation by France – moving Anglo-Bourbon relations to the forefront of parliamentary discussion – was realized on 13 March 1778 with the official announcement of a Franco-American alliance. France’s (and subsequently Spain’s) entry into the war led to considerable pressure both public and political, urging resolute British action against her traditional enemy; though there were some (echoing Chatham) who argued that Britain should first conciliate the colonists in order to free resources for serious hostilities with the Bourbon powers.³⁷ Any coherent strategy was frustrated by the political crisis of 1782, leading to Shelburne’s defeat the following year over the peace preliminaries – difficulties that abroad were linked with parliamentary instability and helped consolidate perceptions of Britain as a volatile and hence intrinsically undesirable alliance partner. In August 1784, for instance, Joseph II observed to the marquis de Noailles, French envoy in Vienna, that Britain was troubled by ‘*toutes sortes de divisions*’.³⁸ Noailles agreed, arguing this would make it difficult for the country to fight another war, and that the need to secure parliamentary tax support made prompt and decisive action in time of crisis virtually impossible.³⁹ Comments such as these by foreign observers – too numerous to document completely – were in no small measure influenced by the opposition press whose propaganda was often misleading,⁴⁰ thus indicating a need for scepticism not always present among its readership, especially those continentals

³⁴ Paul Langford, ‘Old Whigs, Old Tories and the American Revolution’, *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, VII (1980), 108.

³⁵ B.L., Add. MS 73550, ff. 222–3: Gage to Viscount Barrington, 2 Sept. 1772.

³⁶ *London Evening Post*, 21 Feb. 1778. For a representative petition see C.J., XXVI, 824–6.

³⁷ *Gentleman’s Magazine*, XLIX (1779), 333–4; *London Chronicle*, 7 Dec. 1778; *London Gazette*, 28 Nov. 1778.

³⁸ Black, *The English Press, 1621–1861*, p. 159.

³⁹ Vienna, Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv, Englische Korrespondenz 129: Kaunitz to Kageneck, 19 May 1784; Paris, Archive Étrangère (Correspondance Politique) Autriche, ff. 3–4, 6–7: Noailles to Vergennes, 4, 6 Aug 1784.

⁴⁰ J. Black, *The English Press, 1621–1861*, p. 208.

unfamiliar with the nature of British politics.⁴¹ The composite effect was worsened when – as on occasion – foreign envoys intrigued with opposition circles and personally fostered a partisan press. An example is Count Voronzov, Russian minister in London who, during the Ochakov crisis, undertook a major press offensive against Pitt's administration, not only buying up numerous papers himself but also enlisting the services of countless hack writers to discredit the government's foreign policy and its underlying objectives. This left Pitt badly shaken, appalled at the prospect 'of not being cordially supported by parliament or the people',⁴² a reaction of anxiety to public censure that in turn kept the ministry demoralized, opposition circles aggressive and the pro-government press hesitant and confused.

There is little doubt that ministerial defeats in the Commons, whether over domestic or foreign issues, made a most unfortunate impression abroad, especially when perceptions were influenced by overly pessimistic if not biased newspaper accounts regularly forwarded to their country by foreign diplomats. Shelburne, in 1782, complained specifically about the *Morning Herald* and *London Courant* for fomenting difficulties over his peace preliminaries,⁴³ while Lord Harcourt more than once reminded French diplomatic officials 'never to pay the least attention to English News Papers, which were a scandal and disgrace to our country',⁴⁴ and James Harris, British envoy in Russia, explaining Britain's slumping reputation at that court, wrote that Catherine 'has received all the impressions of our government from printed speeches and newspaper trash'.⁴⁵

This suggests that press polemics, pretty generally throughout the eighteenth century, helped create the environment – the mood – in which policy options were discussed and implemented. Not confined within a closed bureaucratic system, British foreign policy was very much responsive to public debate, a debate shaped by the culture of print,⁴⁶ and under whose influence policy makers formulated and explained their actions. Since parliament was the central venue for the constitutional authorization of policy, press commentary inevitably influenced ministerial attitudes and decisions, and thereby the policies critical for domestic political stability and, consequently, foreign perceptions of Britain's unity and strength.

There does not appear to be much evidence that opposition papers were being supplied with funds by anti-ministerial sources during this time. Until the early 1780s when the whig party organization arranged for fairly steady subsidizing of its press adherents, this practice appears to have been quite sporadic and confined mainly to specific factional campaigns.

On the whole, opposition papers (which in the 1780s and 90s came to be almost synonymous with 'Foxite') could be regarded as proponents of a more serious type

⁴¹ M. Roberts, *Splendid Isolation 1763–1780* (Reading, 1970), pp. 10–15.

⁴² *The Political Memoranda of Francis, 5th Duke of Leeds*, ed. O. Browning (1884), p. 160; Bodl., Blend Burges MS 33, ff. 142–3; Ewart to Burges, 5 Apr. 1791.

⁴³ Bedfordshire R. O., L30/14/306/19: Shelburne to Lord Grantham, 24 Oct. 1782.

⁴⁴ T.N.A. (P.R.O.) SPF 78/283: Harcourt to Rochford, 31 July 1771.

⁴⁵ Isabel de Madariaga, *Great Britain, Russia and the Armed Neutrality of 1780* (1962), p. 354.

⁴⁶ For the role of pamphlets in this process see K. W. Schweizer, 'Israel Mauduit: Pamphleteering and Foreign Policy in the Age of the Elder Pitt' in, *Hanoverian Britain and Empire. Essays in Memory of Phillip Lawson*, ed. S. Taylor, R. Connors and C. Jones (Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 198–209.

of journalism than that offered by government papers. After all, a paper promoting the opposition could expect far fewer emoluments if that were the motive for its affiliation. An opposition group could never offer the sum of money available to the treasury nor could it provide the enticements available only to those in office: among them, titles, sinecures, preferential mailing facilities, and prior access to official intelligence.⁴⁷ Moreover, an opposition paper—as frequently demonstrated—was much more vulnerable to prosecution for transgressions, however slight, particularly when a ministry was intent on intimidating its opponents.⁴⁸ Finally, an administration could—and often did—create problems emanating from the stamp and post offices both of which were able to interfere with a paper's size and circulation.⁴⁹

The greater part of the 1780s saw a decline in the general quality of newspaper journalism with more papers taking the lead of the *Morning Post* which ushered in a fashion for light-hearted, scandalous even bawdy items, this ironically occurring at a time of growing consensus about the need for comprehensive moral reform⁵⁰—one of the legacies of the disastrous American war. That war had 'highlighted a host of pre-existing problems and tensions in polity, economy and society. It also exacerbated certain longstanding problems, and suggested alarming possibilities that the future might hold in store.'⁵¹

The 1780s were also a decade of parties vying for the favour of specific publications with the ultimate result of indiscriminate loyalties among many papers. Both the Pitt ministry and the whig organization outdid themselves in attempts to mobilize press propaganda on their side, through often less than credible means. The upshot was a decline in the quality of serious journalism combined with a general loss of press integrity and respectability which explains the reluctance of politicians to become too visibly involved in its activities.⁵²

The developing French revolutionary crisis induced the Pitt ministry to engage as many pro-ministerial papers as possible in order to defuse potential press criticism, influence political debates and, arguably, maintain its improved public image and hence parliamentary credibility in the wake of the popular Eden treaty and satisfactory outcome of the Dutch crisis of 1787.⁵³ Between 1782 and 1792 the number of London dailies, it has been calculated, increased from nine to 14.⁵⁴ Of the 14, the

⁴⁷ L. Werkmeister, *The London Daily Press, 1772–1792* (Lincoln, Neb., 1962), p. 61; Aspinall, *Politics and the Press*, *passim*.

⁴⁸ C. Elmsley, 'Repression, Terror and the Rule of Law in England during the Decade of the French Revolution', *English Historical Review*, C (1985), 801–25.

⁴⁹ K. Ellis, *The Post Office in the 18th Century. A Study in Administrative History* (1958); Christie, 'English Newspapers', p. 314.

⁵⁰ *The Transformation of Political Culture. England and Germany in the Late Eighteenth Century*, ed. E. Hellmuth (Oxford, 1990), p. 16.

⁵¹ Joanna Innes, 'The Reformation of Manners Movement in Later 18th Century England', *ibid.*, p. 60; Black, *The English Press, 1621–1861*, p. 102.

⁵² A. Aspinall, 'The Social Status of Journalists at the Beginning of the 19th Century', *Review of English Studies*, XXI (1945), 216–32; E. Eisenstein, 'On Revolution and the Printed Word', in *Revolution in History*, ed. R. Porter and M. Teich (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 186–205.

⁵³ Jennifer Mori, *William Pitt and the French Revolution 1785–1795* (Edinburgh, 1997), pp. 63–5; Black, 'Parliament and Foreign Policy', pp. 162–3; B.L., Add. MS 35383, pp. 263–4; Philip Yorke to Hardwicke, 27 Nov. 1787; Centre for Kentish Studies, C168A: Carmarthen to Dorset, 7 Dec. 1787.

⁵⁴ A. Andrews, *The History of British Journalism* (New York, 1968), pp. 236–7.

treasury allegedly 'controlled' nine by 1790: the *Morning Herald*, the *Public Advertiser*, the *World*, the *Times*, the *Diary*, the *Daily Advertiser*, the *Oracle*, the *Star* and the *Public Ledger*. In London, by this time, there were also seven tri-weekly and two weekly papers.⁵⁵

It is doubtful whether potential rewards were sufficient to ensure the continuous loyalty of a paper. In considering monetary subventions alone, it must be noted that the highest treasury payment to any paper was £600 a year; most throughout the 1780s and 90s received less than £200 annually.⁵⁶ In 1784, for example, John Benjafield received £310 from secret service funds to buy a share in the *Morning Post*, as part of a plan to solidify that paper's pro-ministerial stance.⁵⁷ Taking into account the higher printing and labour costs during these years, even £600 would not have amounted to much newspaper revenue or swayed an editorial stance. In 1793, advertising revenue was still considered to be the leading source of income for a paper. It was estimated that a paper with a circulation of 1,000 a day would sustain a loss of about £30 a week – nearly equal to weekly printing costs. Increased sales were not the answer since these meant higher printing costs, leading to the inevitable conclusion that 'it is only through advertisements that a newspaper can be printed'.⁵⁸

There were other sources of income, especially for small circulation papers who were not averse to including dubious types of material. One device was the sale of 'puffs' which was recorded in the *General Advertiser* in 1744,⁵⁹ and possibly originated even earlier. The 'puff' usually consisted of a favourable paragraph or two paid for at the customary advertisement rate by political, theatrical or other notables who wished to be publicly praised. Another practice, which continued into the nineteenth century,⁶⁰ was the personal 'anecdote', the sole purpose of which was extortion through suppression or contradiction fees. The anecdote had been invented by the *Morning Post* in the early 1770s and soon became enormously popular with many papers, the *World*, *Oracle*, and *Times* being particularly known for them. Finally, newspapers offering literary content could also garner substantial fees for printing excerpts from popular literary works.⁶¹

That the Pitt ministry was forced by the end of 1792 to found two of its own newspapers, the *Sun* and *True Briton*, with which to manipulate public opinion, offers striking proof of the unreliability of its 'hireling' press. The two new government papers were filled with a steady stream of diatribe aimed at their opponents – specifically all those publications maligning Pittite policies. In March 1793, the *True Briton* claimed that 'the *Herald* speaks falsely, the *Times* is changeable, the *Oracle* is dumb, the *Chronicle* is partial, the *Post* is stupid, and the *World* is approaching its end'.⁶² These hysterical allegations were clearly exaggerated, for many

⁵⁵ Werkmeister, *London Daily Press*, p. 331; Black, *The English Press, 1621–1861*, p. 14.

⁵⁶ A. Aspinall, *Politics and the Press* (1949), p. 68; Black, *The English Press 1621–1861*, p. 137.

⁵⁷ Barker, *Newspaper, Politics and Public Opinion*, p. 48.

⁵⁸ Asquith, 'Advertising and the Press', p. 704.

⁵⁹ Walker, 'Advertising in London Newspapers', p. 129.

⁶⁰ Aspinall, 'The Social Status of Journalists', pp. 224–5.

⁶¹ L. Werkmeister, *Jemmie Boswell and the London Press* (New York, 1963), pp. 12–15.

⁶² *Idem.*, *A Newspaper History of England, 1792–1793* (Lincoln, Neb., 1967), p. 175.

ministerial papers both before and after the founding of the *Sun* and *True Briton* were the not unwilling recipients of government propaganda. The problem was a tendency towards inconsistency and vacillation.

There were certain conditions prevailing during the early years of the French Revolution which militated against the flamboyant style of journalism – designed to broaden popular appeal – that had become characteristic especially of government papers. The concentration on lighthearted items of entertainment, diversion and ‘fashionable intelligence’, so commonplace during the 1780s, was during the turbulent climate of the revolutionary period, being subordinated to a greater demand for serious contributions on public affairs, domestic but especially foreign. Public patronage, in other words, steadily shifted towards the more sober publications⁶³ – those with a decided political slant, revolutionary developments becoming the most prominent subject of coverage with a steady stream of dramatic, disquieting and increasingly threatening news. The growing radicalism of French changes and their consequences evoked indigenous responses in Britain, some supportive, most critical – government papers taking the opportunity to paint the government opposition in lurid jacobin colours, equating their activities with sedition and disloyalty. All this, combined with the outbreak of war in 1793, greatly intensified public interest in continental news at the same time as newspapers provided the means for meeting this demand.

Opposition papers generally enjoyed a reputation for higher quality of journalism, a quality which rose appreciably during the revolutionary period. Remarks by James Grant and the authors of the history of the *Times* concerning the lack of independent editorial criticism in newspapers at the time are distinctly misleading.⁶⁴ From the time when James Perry as editor of the anti-government *Gazetteer* in the early 1780s had first initiated the concept of forceful editorial leadership,⁶⁵ based on political principles and convictions, a steady improvement in this regard became visible in opposition papers. Perry’s *Morning Chronicle* and the *Morning Post*, with Daniel Stuart first as editor and later as owner, were known for hard-hitting editorial content and superior standards.⁶⁶ In the early 1790s the distinctiveness of opposition papers was more apparent than ever and deviated significantly from the increasingly conservative ideas of the aristocratic whig leadership.⁶⁷ In fact, any constraints that whig subsidizing may have hoped to have on the opposition press were removed when the whig subsidy structure ended in 1791.⁶⁸ Admittedly, readers wanted more than purely political content in a paper. Daniel Stuart usually included poetry and ‘society news’ or gossip, and even Perry, the most ardent of Foxite supporters, recognized the

⁶³ *History of the Times* (5 vols, 1932–52), I, 34.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18; James Grant, *The Newspaper Press* (3 vols, 1871–2) I, 230.

⁶⁵ Christie, ‘English Newspapers’, pp. 334–58; Robert Haig, *The Gazetteer, 1735–1797. A Study in the 18th Century English Newspaper* (Carbondale, Ill., 1960), ch. 11.

⁶⁶ Werkmeister, *Newspaper History*, p. 338; Anon., ‘The Periodical Press’, *Edinburgh Review*, XXXVIII (1823), 362.

⁶⁷ D. Ginter, ‘The Financing of the Whig Party Organization, 1783–93’, *American Historical Review*, LXXI (1965–6), 436.

⁶⁸ Werkmeister, *Newspaper History*, pp. 31–2.

necessity for printed ephemera;⁶⁹ which brings one to the consideration of who precisely composed the reading audience. Here David Cressy's work has shown that both the rate of literacy and enthusiasm for newspaper reading – if not reading generally – grew steadily throughout the century at all levels across society at large.⁷⁰ Indeed, by the 1760s, the assimilation of political literature had become a communal activity, permitting those literate to share the contents of papers (or pamphlets and magazines) with others unable to read or afford a subscription.⁷¹ Such material could likewise be accessed in coffee houses, private clubs, lending libraries, and debating societies, which further assured availability in diverse venues and among broad social constituents.⁷²

Conversely, there were inhibitors to wider circulation, causing Cobbett as late as 1802 to observe that a large proportion of the populace was still not exposed to newspapers.⁷³ A major reason for this was that increases in stamp duties were inevitably accompanied by increases in newspaper prices. In the early 1790s, the average price was about 4d. and reached 7d. by 1815,⁷⁴ making it accessible only to the more well-to-do. The poorer classes were further hampered when Pitt passed a law against the lending of newspapers by hawkers in 1789, at the request of proprietors worried about losses in retail revenue. These restrictions, partly offset by alternative means of access, make readership figures highly problematic: rough approximations at best, for London and provincial papers alike.⁷⁵ Still, the important fact to remember is that proprietors were first and foremost concerned with pleasing those who provided the bulk of their circulation custom: the select and richer proportion of newspaper readers. That proprietors were aware of the economic status of their clientele is partly reflected in the absence until the 1820s of advertisements featuring products for low-income consumers. Nevertheless there is evidence that those of lesser social standing, in Brewer's words 'artisans, mechanics and apprentices', increasingly had access to newspapers especially after 1760. By the 1790s there were growing complaints that these elements were reading radical papers such as the *Sheffield Register* or *Manchester Gazette*.⁷⁶

⁶⁹ I. Asquith, 'The Structure, Ownership and Control of the Press 1780–1855', in *Newspaper History*, ed. Boyce et al., p. 107.

⁷⁰ D. Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order* (1975), pp. 145–55; R.S. Schofield, 'The Measurement of Literacy in Pre-Industrial England', in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. J. Goody (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 312–26.

⁷¹ *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England*, ed. J. Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor, (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 162–74, 226–45. The point that cost did not necessarily mean a low or socially restricted readership has also been made more recently in *Press, Politics and the Public Sphere in North America, 1760–1820*, ed. H. Barker and S. Burrows (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 101–8.

⁷² A. Ellis, *The Penny Universities* (1956); Paul Kaufman, *Libraries and their Users* (1969); Brewer, *Party Ideology*, pp. 148–60; D. Andrew, 'Popular Culture and Public Debate: London, 1780', *The Historical Journal*, XXXIX (1996), 405–23; *idem*, *London Debating Societies* (1994).

⁷³ G.D.H. Cole, *The Life of William Cobbett* (New York, 1924), p. 80; cf. Black, *The English Press, 1621–1861*, p. 106; R. Williams, 'The Press and Popular Culture: An Historical Perspective', in *Newspaper History*, ed. Boyce et al., pp. 44–5.

⁷⁴ R. K. Webb, *The British Working Class Reader* (1955), p. 32.

⁷⁵ Brewer, *Party Ideology*, pp. 143–5.

⁷⁶ Walker, 'Advertising in London Newspapers', p. 125. Cf. P. L. Hollis, *The Pauper Press* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 112 ff; M. J. Smith, 'English Radical Newspapers in the French Revolutionary Era 1790–1803', University of London Ph.D., 1979, pp. 162–3.

Although alarmist, anti-jacobin elements are usually stressed, the idea of moderate reform was still a viable force among the middle classes during the revolutionary years. A clear distinction was made between populist, lower class radicalism and the, by comparison, tempered reforming aspirations of the middle classes.⁷⁷ The moderate reform program of the whig 'Friends of the People' failed in that they attempted to base it on the old country association model and appealing to the new reactionary country gentry. But in London moderate reform had strong organized support among the members of the Merchant Taylors Association which more than any other group typified middle-class aims, the peaceful liberalization of political life.⁷⁸

The self-consciousness of the English propertied classes could not fail but be sharpened by the developments in France. The need to protect their status, property, and wealth strengthened the bond between them in opposing the war and commensurate taxation, both of which were viewed as potentially ruinous. It is, of course, too early in reference to newspapers to speak of a 'middle class' press in the modern sense: the concerns of this emerging social group in urban and rural areas alike, would not substantially influence newspaper content until the mid-nineteenth century. Still, traces of conscious press appeal to the expanding middle orders can already be found in the 1790s. By 1797, the *Monthly Magazine* was established to 'propagate liberal principles' and courted popularity by ruling against the disproportionate taxation of the gentry, and in 1798 it spoke of 'the middle ranks in whom the great mass of information and of public and private virtues reside'.⁷⁹ Possibly still active here were memories of the Gordon riots, between the extremists, ever dedicated to 'rough and tumble' politics, and those of a more sober, moderate bent opposed to violent tactics which they viewed as outdated and minimal to an enlightened understanding of politics.

It was the opposition papers such as the *Morning Chronicle*, the *Gazetteer*, the *Morning Post* and in its short life from May 1788 to June 1789, Peter Stuart's *Star*, which were the most conspicuous in catering to a progressively minded readership. This tends to support Cookson's conclusion that even amidst moments of extreme ministerial reaction, the reformist stance remained visible in the press and surprisingly resilient. More extremist views went 'underground', promoted such means as handbills, posters, petitions and songs, ephemeral forms of propaganda both effective and difficult to police.⁸⁰

After initially backing radicalism, opposition papers grew more cautious and threw in their lot with the moderates. And their audiences responded in kind, supporting the papers with subscriptions, editorials and, not infrequently, lead articles. James Perry long held a wide Foxite section of adherents. The *Gazetteer* only declined in

⁷⁷ L. D. Schwarz, *London Life in the Age of Industrialisation. Entrepreneurs, Labour Force and Living Conditions 1700–1850* (Cambridge, 1992); A. Briggs, 'Middle Class Consciousness in English Politics, 1780–1846', *Past and Present*, No. 9 (1956), 67.

⁷⁸ D. Ginter, 'The Loyalist Association Movement of 1792–93 and British Public Opinion', *Historical Journal*, IX (1966), 181–9.

⁷⁹ Briggs, 'Middle Class Consciousness', p. 68. Cf. *The Middling Sort of People. Culture, Society and Politics in England 1550–1800*, ed. J. Barry and C. Brooks (1994), introduction.

⁸⁰ J. E. Cookson, *The Friends of Peace. Anti-War Liberalism in England 1793–1815* (Cambridge, 1982), ch. 4; Black, *The English Press 1621–1861*, p. 156.

popularity when it could no longer maintain the standards which Perry as editor had previously established for it.⁸¹ Yet it always reflected the Foxite creed and the paper's failing years saw a decline in its advertising clients some time before experiencing a drop-off in readership.⁸² The *Star*, while never a going financial concern, won appreciation for its original news reporting and opinionated editorials.⁸³ That a discriminating readership existed is again evidenced by the fact that the oppositionist *Morning Herald*, which Dudley was forced to lease to the Pitt ministry in 1790, dropped in circulation from between 4,000 and 5,000 to about 800 a day by 1793.⁸⁴ Upwardly mobile industrialists, financiers, entrepreneurs, and their social aspirations also became the subject of complex literary portrayals, both positive and condemnatory, which, commercially mass-produced, reflected deep-seated concerns about the potential implications of business-led developments for traditional values and ideals.⁸⁵

Ministerial papers could not avoid being affected by new journalistic techniques. The possibilities of a more responsible attitude on the part of proprietors were strengthened by the new trend towards individual ownership. With one or two individuals able to raise the capital for a newspaper, the disputes of the past between multiple proprietors over the policy of a paper could be avoided. An example was the *Morning Post* which in the early 1780s had its direction dictated over the protests of several other proprietors by the staunch tory supporter John Benjafield. With a single individual able to determine policies and the quality of a paper, and often acting as his own editor, the picture was bound to change. When principles were important and if a newspaper could survive without government financing or other supplements, it was bound to lapse in its alliance with ministerial interests.

Although pro-government papers were often dutiful in their anti-jacobin declarations and generally subscribed to the reactionary government stance, there were also at times significant traces in some papers of a leaning towards the liberal cause. John Bell, as owner of the ministerial *Oracle*, frequently co-operated with Sheridan, the manager of the whig press, in the publishing of pro-opposition articles. Under the editorship of Peter Stuart, the *Oracle* featured pieces written by James Mackintosh, an outspoken moderate reformer and member of the liberal whig 'Friends of the People' formed in 1792. Undoubtedly, Bell must have approved of the arrangement. While always insisting on his attachment to the government and constitution, his most vociferous anti-ministerial attacks invariably appeared to coincide with a decline in his business fortunes. William Woodfall's *Diary*,⁸⁶ which had since its start in 1789, professed a dedication to Pitt's policies, tended to waver during 1792 and 1793, its final year, and lent appreciable support to the reformist camp.⁸⁷ One could also perceive a greater attention to excellence in presentation and production in some ministerial papers. Foremost was John Bell, who as proprietor of the *Oracle*, demanded the highest

⁸¹ Haig, *op. cit.*, p. 231; Christie, 'English Newspapers', pp. 338–40.

⁸² Asquith, 'Advertising and the Press', p. 708.

⁸³ Werkmeister, *London Daily Press*, p. 255.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

⁸⁵ J. Raven, *Judging New Wealth. Popular Publishing and Responses to Commerce in England 1750–1800* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 1–18.

⁸⁶ B.L., Add. MS 27780 (Woodfall Papers).

⁸⁷ Werkmeister, *Newspaper History*, pp. 125, 172–4.

standards in the technical and news aspects of the paper and always sought the best personnel for every department.⁸⁸ By 1794, Bell's recognition of the public's interest in accurate, well-developed news reports led him to undertake personally a trip to France in order to provide first hand communications of the war. Bell's penchant for responding to the tastes of his readers continued to be evident in the contents of the *Universal Advertiser*, which he subsequently owned. A similar example is James Perry who was sent to Paris to report directly on events in 1797.⁸⁹

John Walter of the *Times* shared Bell's perception of public demands on a newspaper and made a number of technical and other changes which considerably elevated the *Times* from its unsavoury gossip-sheet reputation. Walter's exertions in this regard give an indication that even an unflinchingly loyal ministerial supporter clearly saw the need for improvements in order to satisfy reader's tastes. The innovations which Walter established for the *Times* would carry on but because his aspiration to the position of king's printer always took precedence during his career,⁹⁰ it tended severely to hamper the *Times's* independence from government influence during his tenure.

It has been shown that ministerial control of its press was not as firm as might have been believed. Aside from Walter, the only steadfast adherent of the Pitt ministry was Henry Sampson Woodfall whose *Public Advertiser* had first swung to Pitt in 1784 and remained a proponent of tory principles until Woodfall's retirement in 1793. Since the *Public Advertiser* does not appear on any records of treasury subsidies to newspapers and since Woodfall had always enjoyed a reputation for respectability in the contents of his paper, it is not implausible that his views on Pittite politics were genuine, though quite an about-turn from his earlier liberal position.

The *World* and the *Herald* both proved disappointing to the ministry. Edward Topham's *World*, whose principal concern was West End witticisms and scandalous gossip and news, usually printed ministerial contributions but was at best politically apathetic. By 1792, the paper was of little use to Pitt as Topham, ruined by litigation costs and other expenditures, tired of running the paper and retired to the country. The *Herald*, after Dudley's forced removal as conductor in 1790, in inexperienced hands tended to lack co-ordinated direction and was not highly effective. As for the *Public Ledger*, its acceptance of even modest government subsidies of £100 a year is somewhat incongruous with its position as a predominantly commercial and shipping publication since its beginning in 1760. The *Ledger* may have seen fit to accept these payments for occasional pro-ministerial items but was, as always, actuated by its services to the commercial community and cannot have been of great service to a ministry requiring substantial innovation and influence.

While it is true that the Pitt ministry did not always receive unqualified support from its papers, the fact that these retained their ministerial connexions shows such links offered advantages which continued to be worthwhile. These advantages were themselves tied in with diverse currents in the press world during the revolutionary years. The appetite for news from the continent made it imperative that newspapers

⁸⁸ S. Morison, *John Bell* (Cambridge, 1930), pp. 9–10.

⁸⁹ Christie, 'English Newspapers', p. 344.

⁹⁰ *History of the Times*, I, 9.

find the best means of securing reliable, up-to-date and regular news of foreign events. At this time, before international news networks had become commonplace, foreign news correspondence was conducted in a rather haphazard and unreliable way. Clearly, the costs of a system of regular, efficient correspondence were prohibitive to papers, which in the early 1790s had at most circulations of a few thousand.⁹¹ Hence, government contributions of this type of intelligence still had to be resorted to in large part. It is also evident that administrations had sufficient leverage, especially during the repressive revolutionary years, in their ability to prosecute owners of papers containing what could be interpreted as seditious matter. This on occasion ruined a paper, such as the radical *Argus* forced out of business as a result of ministerial action in 1792. Equally, radical publishers of provincial papers could face hostility from the local bench and loyal mobs; the *Leicester Chronicle* and *Manchester Herald* both coming to an abrupt end in 1793, with the *Sheffield Register* being suppressed the following year. As long as a newspaper claimed – and could demonstrate – identification with the ministerial cause, it was generally assured of protection from this serious and expensive possibility.

Still, the Pitt ministry's hold on its newspapers was usually rather tenuous and illustrates the truism that a government could influence but not necessarily control the press. That Pitt was able to sway so many papers to his side in the late 1780s was due to the fact that an unprecedentedly high number of newspapers had come into existence and the fact that journalism aimed at a popular audience, had gained currency throughout the decade. The period of the American revolution had seen an elevation in journalistic standards; these then briefly declined but were to be revived during the French revolutionary era. The combination of the French and the Industrial revolutions fostered an expanded readership with new criteria for judging excellence in newspapers – making the latter both a mirror of attitudes pervading society as well as a formative influence in diverse aspects of national life – what one author has called 'an active force' in history.⁹²

Newspaper proprietors during the French revolution were alert to changes in readers' demands which called for a reversion to responsible principles and policies. The finances of a paper always figured prominently in the mind of a proprietor who, therefore, had to deliver what his readers expected. It can, moreover, be doubted whether most proprietors were truly committed to Pittite toryism; it was in the first decade of the nineteenth century that one sees the wider prevalence of genuine political independence and impartial commentary on the part of papers. These were the ultimate standards expected by a discriminating public. In the early 1790s the principle of informing public opinion, which had begun tentatively in the 1770s, was re-established in both government and opposition newspapers, a situation in which government assistance and influence became reduced in importance and limited in results. Although, in conclusion, the growing democratization of political life by the end of the eighteenth century owed probably less to newspapers than cheaper pamphlets, handbills and tracts (not to mention other, non-printed propaganda)

⁹¹ J. J. Mathews, 'The Genesis of Newspaper War Correspondence', *Journalism Quarterly*, XXIX (1952), 6–12.

⁹² Harris, *Politics and the Rise of the Press*, p. 2.

papers provided a populist dimension of parliamentary politics, in the process creating a political culture 'that became more and more oriented around national issues and divisions. The Press ensured that partisanship in the centre was refracted throughout a growing cross section of society demanding that Parliament be more accountable as well as accessible.'⁹³ This broadening of political horizons inevitably led to a change in governmental attitudes, as policy makers – aware of the new environment that had been created, responded in ways that ultimately made the political process more responsive, accessible and open: what Habermas has called 'the public sphere', dissolving established social structures while leading to a politics grounded in argument and persuasion instead of, traditionally, purely influence, connexions and status.⁹⁴ The density of this public sphere increased over time, symbolizing not only the pace of competing cultural/political forces but also represents a testimony to the country's ability to accommodate the new demands arising from rapid socio-economic change. Throughout this process the press played a key role, constituting the mechanism for the continuing diffusion of information which would deepen, expand if not institutionalize, the public sphere in the decades to come.⁹⁵

⁹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 106–7; *Transformation of Political Culture*, ed. Hellmuth, p. 31.

⁹⁴ Harris, *Politics and the Rise of the Press*, p. 108. Or, as Jeremy Black cogently put it: 'Public politics was . . . well established in the press by the close of the eighteenth century and politics had become public to a considerable extent, albeit not in all spheres. The press was both the principal medium of the new public politics and able to report and comment on it': *The English Press, 1621–1861*, p. 132. Cf. J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989). For critical reflections see the introduction to *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. C. Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), pp. 1–50.

⁹⁵ *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe*, ed. B. Dooley and S. Baron (2001), p. 7.