

The Roots of Free Press:

The Rebellion of the Printers in the American Revolution

10/24/2012

INTRODUCTION

On September 25, 1789, the United States Congress proposed twelve amendments to the Constitution. The first of these amendments provided the earliest legal protection of the freedom of the press in America.¹ Yet, the recognition of this freedom had a much earlier history in America. The understanding of free press evolved from an earlier concept of liberty of the press through its application to print propaganda in the wake of the Stamp Act and early Revolutionary period. The liberty of the press involved the printing of factual material, regardless of its implications, without restriction. A free press maintains the ability to print not only factual accounts, but opinion and secondary sources, including propaganda.

The role of the press redefined itself through a series of events beginning in the American colonial period, roughly around 1730, through the eve of Revolution in the 1775; most notably, the Zenger Trial, the Stamp Act, and the extensive use of pre-Revolution propaganda. Each of these events were pivotal points in first establishing the liberty of the press in practice in America, then shifting to a free press through the use of Revolutionary propaganda. Propaganda is defined as “the manipulation of information to influence public opinion”² and was imperative to the development of understood rights for speech and print. Yet in order to fully understand this development, it is first important to understand the history surrounding the role of the press in the American Revolution.

¹ "Bill of Rights." Bill of Rights. Accessed November 12, 2012. http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/bill_of_rights.html.

² "Propaganda." Merriam-Webster. 2012. Accessed November 12, 2012. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/propaganda>.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

The role of the colonial printers in the origins of the American Revolution remains necessary in a movement which affected every class of people within Britain and America over a period of nearly twenty years. The enormous social scope encompassed in this period, and its obvious importance to the formation of the modern United States has led scholars to study and analyze the Revolution in a variety of ways. Nearly all these histories document the role of the press in the origins of the Revolution, but while they recognize the importance of the subject, they disagree with the changing context of the historians. Over time, historiographers have mapped these changing patterns in order to better understand why interpretations have changed, and in doing so, better understand the history itself. There are currently five recognized schools of thought concerning the origins of the American Revolution and the role of colonial printers in its outbreak: the Whig, Progressive, Conservative, Neo-Whig, and New Left. In seeking to describe these schools, it is also important to explain their origins to better understand the historical narrative as a whole.

The Whig school was comprised of primarily American historians writing in the direct wake of the Revolutionary War. The minister William Gordon wrote the first full history of the American Revolution in 1788, when he and his contemporaries were still riding the wave of patriotism emanating from their fresh victory over the British Empire. These histories, marked by American prominence on a global scale, were written into the early 20th century as American patriotism was reinforced by further victory in the War of 1812 and by western expansion. By the latter point, they were also greatly influenced by the ideology of Manifest Destiny, further propagating American patriotic ideals. The most renowned author to be categorized in the Whig school was George Bancroft, who argued in his *History of the United States* that the inevitable

spread of liberty drove the Revolutionary patriots.³ Yet, very few of these early authors were historians by profession, and thus often lacked the rigorous methodology that is expected in the profession today. Thus, these historians also largely ignored the role of individual groups, such as the printers, in favor of these sweeping ideological factors and the influence of major leaders.

The Progressive school emerged as a response to the social issues that emerged after the Industrial Revolution from the early 20th century to the late 1950's. Many intellectuals shifted focus to the class tensions and inequalities that had developed in American society in the early 20th century as a result of the boom of factory labor and economic changes. The Progressive historians were so heavily influenced by class divisions that they began to also view historical developments in terms of economic fluctuations, seeking correlations between economics and early class structure. Notable Progressive, Arthur M. Schlesinger argued that the Revolution was an attempt by the merchants and commercial classes to overthrow British restrictions in order to attain more profit. In *Prelude to Independence* he further contended that the printers supported the Revolution as a response to harsh taxes that would have deeply cut their profits. Furthermore, the Progressives denied the idea that the colonists unified around an ideology based on liberty and self-government, and suggested instead that the printers utilized these themes in order to ignite the passions of the people, and ensure greater readership and subscription.⁴ The focus of the Progressive historians is clearly a product of their own socioeconomic atmosphere, but this method of study did bring a more analytical and professionalized approach to American history.

The Progressives maintained relative popularity until the advent of World War II, when changing political currents surrounding the Cold War gave rise to the Conservative or Consensus

³ Anonymous. "The American Revolution: A Historiographical Introduction." The American Revolution. Accessed September 19, 2012. <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/americanrevolution/index.html>.

⁴ Arthur Meier Schlesinger. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain; 1764 - 1776*. Boston: Northeastern Univ. Pr., 1983.

school. Similar to earlier interpretations, these historians were influenced by another influx of American patriotism. However, unlike the Whig interpretations the Conservative school argued that America had established its own sociopolitical structures separate from heavy British jurisdiction before the War, and that patriots were simply fighting to protect what already existed. Richard Hofstadter, a key historian in propagating this interpretation, contended that not only were these structures well-established in early America, but that the Revolution was a popular movement not simply driven by small interest groups as the Progressives had argued. Within this framework, the printers were crucial to spreading both political and social information in order to continue the political discussion that was already ongoing within the colonies. Conservatives also returned to the importance of the Revolution as an ideological shift, not just conflict as a means of material goals.⁵ The Conservative interpretation sought to focus on stability through American history but lacked the variability that would mark successive histories. This view was shifted by an intense revival in scholarship, forming the modern Neo-Whig and New Left schools.

The Neo-Whig school was founded by a single historian, Bernard Bailyn, whose rigorous study of propaganda pamphlets, broadsides, and print imagery led him to conclude that the Revolution was an ideological upheaval that ultimately formed a radical new republican society. Like the Conservative school, Neo-Whigs recognized cohesion among the colonists, though the latter identified this unity through the ideology of liberty rather than strictly political discussion. They argued that the press was simply used as a vehicle to propagate this ideology.⁶ Many historians writing throughout the Cold War adopted this focus of a revolution driven by ideas.

⁵Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Aaron, and William Miller. *The United States; the History of a Republic*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967, p.115-152.

⁶Bernard Bailyn, and John B. Hench, eds. *The Press & the American Revolution*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981.

These men argued against any class-based tensions and focused on the popularity of print propaganda and pamphlets to demonstrate that the colonists believed in their strong political rhetoric.⁷ The Neo-Whig interpretation has continued into modern historical studies, but the thorough scholarship of the historians has also given way to the contemporary New Left school of thought.

The New Left school developed amidst the Civil Rights movement and the concurrent social and cultural changes of the 1960's and 1970's. This atmosphere influenced historians to question the roles of gender, race, and subcultures in the formation of the United States. A focus on individualism and the use of a "deconstructionist" methodology brought in immense variability in historical studies. The work of Leonard W. Levy, for instance, centers on the origins of the constitutional protection of free press. In doing so, he argues that the early Revolutionary printers were not only instrumental in propagating the concept of liberty as a unifying factor, but also that the act of printing propaganda was sociopolitical rebellion itself, which culminated in the eventual legal protection of the freedom of the press.⁸ The ability of these authors to examine so many groups and roles on a more individual level has allowed for a much broader and more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of the origins of the American Revolution.

Despite the revival in more focused studies by New Left historians, there are still many aspects of the Revolution that need to be addressed. The roles of the genders, classes, individuals, and subcultures need to be studied not only within the context of their Revolutionary origins, but also in the longer scope of American history. The American Revolution and the

⁷ Anonymous. "The American Revolution: A Historiographical Introduction." The American Revolution. Accessed September 19, 2012. <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/features/americanrevolution/index.html>.

⁸ Levy, Leonard W. *Emergence of a Free Press*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

subsequent sociopolitical changes that followed it undoubtedly shaped each of these groups. Understanding how these changes developed toward their modern recognition can only occur by assessing this transformation over time. For instance, the role of the printers in colonial America drastically changed during the Revolutionary period. This is a facet that is not addressed in these major schools. Furthermore, this change is imperative to understanding the origins and development of the protected free press that Americans embrace today.

THE RIGHTS OF MEN

The concept of liberty of the press in the minds of colonial American citizens was entirely different from the modern concept of free press. Liberty of the press began as an assumed public liberty of the British people. Although freedom of speech or liberty of the press were not directly protected through any legislation, the concept of both as given rights to all British citizens was well established by the early 18th century.⁹ Citizens understood that the primary purpose of government was the protection of property and privileges, and argued that this was impossible without freedom of speech.¹⁰ Freedom to voice opinions was one of the only forms of keeping a government in check available to the general public. Public figures frequently argued through the press that governments only have reason to restrict speech when they are guilty of infringing on personal rights.¹¹ The press was simply a vehicle for speech, and the terms freedom of speech and liberty of the press were often interchangeable; both well established by the 18th century.¹²

⁹ Anonymous, Letter to the Author of the New-England Courant, *New-England Courant*. No. VIII. July 9, 1722.

¹⁰ Bradford, Thomas and William. 1766. To The Public. *Boston Gazette*. September 29.

¹¹ Anonymous, Letter to the Author of the New-England Courant, *New-England Courant*. No. VIII. July 9, 1722.

¹² *New-England Weekly Journal*. 1728. From the Flying-Post, March 9, 1728. To the Author. May 27.

Free speech and liberty of the press were not without understood restrictions, however. Free speech was only regarded as a given right so long as the rights of another were not being damaged, violated, or controlled by it.¹³ As the liberty of the press became more understood as a given right, editorials began almost immediately began to recognize the abuse of this power. They argued that “Liberty discharges no Man from the Obligation of the Moral law.” The papers were not being used to promote free speech but to spread “scandal and defamation” which could only lead to eventual “sedition and rebellion.”¹⁴ While this may have foreshadowed the future of the American colonies, there were still many British restrictions to control both free speech and the liberty of the press.

Within both Britain and the American colonies, early newspapers were licensed to print under local legislation. When printers stepped too far outside the lines of report or commentary, they were at the will of the legislation to revoke their printing license or take them to court. Legislators prosecuted the most extreme cases of political mockery via seditious libel, a legal protection roughly defined as derogatory remarks towards governments or their representatives. Unlike within Britain, however this definition changed throughout each colony, and was enacted at the will of the legislation.¹⁵ The flexibility of this law within the colonies resulted in a proportionally large number of cases, often cited as abuse. American colonists reacted strongly against the unhindered use of seditious libel, arguing that they were not printing defamatory

¹³ Anonymous, Letter to the Author of the New-England Courant, *New-England Courant*. No. VIII. July 9, 1722.

¹⁴ *New-England Weekly Journal*. 1728. From the Flying-Post, March 9, 1728. To the Author. May 27.

¹⁵ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 63.

reflections, but known truths.¹⁶ This conflict culminated in the most renowned court case of 18th century America: the trial of John Peter Zenger.

THE ZENGER TRIAL

In 1734, the immigrant printer John Peter Zenger criticized newly the appointed governor of New York, William Cosby, in an issue of the *New York Weekly Journal*, inciting a political scandal. It was well-known that Cosby had altered his salary and appointed a judge of the State Supreme Court through fraudulent methods, but he attacked the press when these rumors were finally circulated. Zenger was jailed for ten months for printing seditious libel while he awaited defense from a Philadelphia lawyer by the name of Andrew Hamilton.¹⁷ While Zenger was still in jail, the *New York Weekly Journal* continued to print articles about Zenger's case and seditious libel. These articles included a series of reprinted British essays titled *Cato's Letters*. John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon were political ideologists who wrote *Cato's Letters* in Britain in the 1720's.¹⁸ Although they primarily reiterate the British understanding of free speech and liberty of the press when printing truthful material and its necessary restraint when it begins to infringe on the rights of another, Trenchard and Gordon become the first to define this boundary. They argued that the role of the press is to provide constructive criticism when the government is not properly meeting its obligations. Therefore, if the printer is producing truths, the agent is in the wrong and it does not fall under seditious libel.¹⁹

¹⁶ Trenchard, John, and Thomas Gordon. "Cato's Letters: No. 15." *Cato's Letters*. Accessed November 13, 2012. http://www.constitution.org/cl/cato_015.htm.

¹⁷ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 64-65.

¹⁸ Trenchard, John, and Thomas Gordon. "Cato's Letters: No. 15." *Cato's Letters*. Accessed November 13, 2012. http://www.constitution.org/cl/cato_015.htm.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

These essays were widely popular throughout the colonies, and were reprinted by several other papers. This move proved crucial for Zenger's trial. The argument developed by Andrew Hamilton was primarily based in the rhetoric of *Cato's Letters* and argued that Zenger was in fact printing known truths. The jury was so sensitive to Zenger's case through the popularity of the newspapers that they acquitted him of all charges.²⁰ The physical application of *Cato's Letters* in opposition to seditious libel was unprecedented and marked an important turning point in the practice of liberty of the press within the American colonies. The repercussions of this trial influenced consequent cases and colonial laws in the following years.

While not directly in opposition of the limitations of the press, the Zenger trial became a paradigm for outspoken journalism in the colonies. Not only did the trial produce more defined limits for the use of seditious libel, it also boosted readership and subscription to colonial newspapers. Printed material became more thoroughly established as an important medium for ideological exchange within the colonies; an effect that would prove much more imperative in the immediate pre-Revolutionary years.²¹ Zenger was identified as a protector of personal liberty and an enemy of oppression, an association which many citizens continued to attach to the press throughout its development.²² While the use of seditious libel to limit criticism of public officials did not disappear in the wake of the Zenger case, the number of prosecutions dropped to nearly zero. Furthermore, the printers who did move through the court system unscathed only cemented the limits of the press in favor of the printers.²³ The most significant turning point in the

²⁰ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 64-65.

²¹ Hofstadter, Richard, Daniel Aaron, and William Miller. *The United States; the History of a Republic* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 119.

²² *New-York Weekly Journal*. 1735. Tandem Vincitur. February 23.

²³ Bradford, Thomas and William. 1766. To The Public. *Boston Gazette*. September 29.

development of a free press other than the Revolution itself was the direct effect of the Stamp Act.

THE STAMP ACT

In 1765 Britain was still reeling from the economic pressures of the French and Indian War. Taxing the colonies became one of the primary solutions to reducing this debt. The idea of utilizing the colonies to generate income outside of resource extraction was not new, however direct taxation had not previously occurred in this way. The Sugar Act of 1764 was the first British law developed for the admitted purpose of generating money from the colonies and had also been met with some opposition.²⁴ The Stamp Act not only affected the merchant class by raising the price of imports, but also affected lawyers, printers, editors, and preachers.²⁵ It allowed Parliament to tax paper, parchment, playing cards, and dice through varying levels of stamp duties. Furthermore, any legal issues with taxation could not be settled through a jury of peers, but were to be taken to the admiralty courts and judged by royal appointees.²⁶ The announcement of the Stamp Act immediately enraged the colonists.

The situation was complicated by the fact that the colonies themselves owed some £2,500,000 in war debts towards which the proposed taxes paid nothing. Additionally, Britain was already profiting some £2,000,000 per year from colonial trade. Many colonists felt that this was tax enough.²⁷ Colonial citizens also felt that this tax was a direct violation of their rights as British citizens. The Stamp Act removed their property without consent through the taxation, and

²⁴ Hofstadter, Richard, Daniel Aaron, and William Miller. *The United States; the History of a Republic* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 131.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 132.

²⁶ Britain. Parliament. *The Stamp Act*. July 4, 1995. Accessed October 26, 2012. <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/related/stampact.htm>.

²⁷ Hofstadter, Richard, Daniel Aaron, and William Miller. *The United States; the History of a Republic* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 131.

removed their right to trial by jury through its enforcement by admiralty courts. While the colonists still contended that the British government was the most free in the world, they argued that the Stamp Act was in direct violation of these granted liberties.²⁸ Arguably the most outraged group of citizens, however, was the printers themselves.

Both Massachusetts (by 1755) and New York (by 1757) had already passed small stamp taxes of their own. When these taxes were enacted, several smaller print shops were driven out of business as the costs of stamp duties counteracted their subscription profits.²⁹ Since the Stamp Act taxes were far greater than these earlier colonial taxes, many printers panicked at the prospect of losing a substantial portion of their profit. Some went so far as to threaten to shut down their presses before the tax was even enforced.³⁰ Regardless of whether they actually went out of business, many presses sent out dramatized “final issues” stirring public dissent. Even the *Pennsylvania Journal* with wide subscription printed a false final issue just before the sanctioning of the Stamp Act crying, “Adieu, Adieu to the LIBERTY of the PRESS...of a STAMP in her vitals.”³¹ Many southern printers suspended press or continued in very limited print due to lower subscriptions and greater restrictions. Virginia’s governor, for instance, halted press on several newspapers for printing “reflections on the unconstitutionality of the Stamp Act;” after which, many southern essays and opinions were sent north for printing.³² An enraged public had threatened many northern printers, urging them to continue to print. The most

²⁸ *Boston Post-Boy*. 1765. From the *New-York Gazette*. December 2.

²⁹ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 65-66.

³⁰ Botein, Stephen. "Printers and the American Revolution." In *The Press and the American Revolution*, edited by Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981), 25.

³¹ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 77.

³² *New-York Journal*. 1766. Virginia, October 25. November 27.

vociferous papers even continued publishing “unstamped” for a time after the Act went into effect.³³

Although there was no evidence of the intention of Parliament to do anything more than tax, many colonists believed that the Stamp act was an attempt to restrict the liberty of the press through monetary control.³⁴ Soon after the sanctioning of the Act, newspapers printed a list of grievances from the New York Assembly arguing that the excessive taxation restrained the liberty of the press and was therefore an infringement on the liberty of the subjects.³⁵ Many citizens argued through editorials that an unrestricted press was necessary to reveal problems within the government providing public feedback, and that the taxation on the papers was directly impeding this.³⁶ Most papers managed to stay afloat, and used this rhetoric to develop different ways to counteract the effects of the Stamp Act through print and profit.

Nearly every paper began to publically contest the restrictions through opinion sections and popularized essays. The printers themselves even became divided by the vehemence with which the act was protested. Partisanship and extreme bias found their roots in this atmosphere of public dissent. Not only were printers using the newspapers to make an argument against this taxation, they soon realized that taking an aggressive stance against such a key issue gained interest and readership. The increase in subscriptions and profits fueled the fires of dissention.³⁷

The vociferousness and unity with which the presses attacked the Stamp Act inadvertently caused a step forward in the development of a free press. The degree to which the

³³ Ibid, 77-78.

³⁴ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 70-71.

³⁵ *New-York Mercury*. 1765. In Assembly, November 30, 1765. December 09.

³⁶ *New-York Journal*. 1766. Virginia, October 25. November 27.

³⁷ Botein, Stephen. "Printers and the American Revolution." In *The Press and the American Revolution*, edited by Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981), 23.

papers spoke out against government legislation was revolutionary in its own right, and had occurred with little to no reprimand. Legislators ceased to charge printers for speaking out for fear that action would only incite more turmoil, possibly escalating to riots.³⁸ For instance, the New York printer William Goddard was the first to print the infamous ‘Join or Die’ emblem, previously used at the Albany Congress during the French and Indian War. This correlation between wartime efforts and resistance to the Stamp Act would have undoubtedly been condemned seditious libel only a few years earlier, yet neither Lieutenant Governor Cadwallader Colden nor his council did anything to stop it.³⁹

The Stamp Act was repealed just one year after its initiation on March 22, 1765. The press recognized this victory as twofold: a success over the physical taxation of the colonists, and as a gain in their own reputation and power. Even the Declaratory Acts, which followed repeal of the Stamp Act stating that Britain reserved the right to tax and decree any legislation, did not reprimand the press in any way.⁴⁰ The printers had gained a sense of power over government restrictions and recognized themselves as vehicles of public opinion.⁴¹ This was demonstrated on the anniversary of the Stamp Acts’ demise for several years after. Printers in nearly every city would describe a series of toasts given at the local coffee houses on the anniversary each 22nd of March. In Massachusetts they toasted “The Boston Gazette and the worthy Members of the House who vindicated the Freedom of the Press.”⁴² In New York they toasted the “Liberty of the

³⁸ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 72-73.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Nash, Gary B., and Paul A. Gilje. "Declaratory Act." In *Encyclopedia of American History*, (Vol. 3. New York: Facts on File, 2003), 103.

⁴¹ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 82.

⁴² *Boston News-Letter*. 1768. Friday last, the 18th of March. March 24.

press” itself.⁴³ This clearly demonstrates that it was well established that the press itself played a key role in the demise of the Stamp Act and that liberty of the press was worth fighting for. Yet, there was still a final pivot that needed to occur before the understood liberty of the press transformed into a free press.

STRENGTHENING THE PRESS

Despite the gains in liberty through the Zenger trial and the resistance to the Stamp Act, there were still some restrictions that most citizens considered acceptable and understood. Even liberty of the press only extended to printing those things considered truths.⁴⁴ After the tumultuous atmosphere surrounding the Stamp Act conflict had settled down, colonial legislators, particularly in Boston in New York, began to tighten restrictions once again through the seditious libel laws; however, the printers had less to fear this time. Newspapers printed editorials and essays describing the abuse of seditious libel, arguing that if the press was not secure, no liberties were.⁴⁵

Printers further attempted to define the understanding of the liberty of the press through the reprint of a dialogue in Parliament surrounding John Wilkes’ *No. 45*, a popular British essay. Wilkes had been condemned for seditious libel while speaking out against the King within Parliament and was arrested under its laws soon after. All members of parliament, however, are protected by the Privilege of Parliament, a law protecting the free speech of legislative members. After his arrest, Wilkes further extended his argument to say that the use of seditious libel was a “restraint of the personal Liberty of every common subject.”⁴⁶ The fact that this conversation

⁴³ *New-York Gazette*. 1770. New-York, March 26. March 26.

⁴⁴ *Connecticut Courant*. 1767. To Mr. Plain Facts. February 23.

⁴⁵ Anonymous. To The Printer, *Boston Gazette*. June 10 1765.

⁴⁶ *Boston Gazette*. 1764. The following is the Copy of the Protest of Seventeen Peers Against the

within Parliament was being printed front page in America in the midst of much debate regarding liberty of the press, demonstrates its use as a sort of propaganda rather than news. More centrally, the widely-read *Boston Gazette* also described some eight unnamed attacks on printers in the previous year, and considered these attacks a possible destruction of the liberty of the press as a whole.⁴⁷

Shortly following this debate in Britain, the colonies identified their own Wilkes in the person of Alexander McDougall, an outspoken merchant, public figure, and later Revolutionary War commander who acted as a martyr for personal liberty and free press early in his career.⁴⁸ In early 1770, presses throughout the colonies were employed reprinting Alexander McDougall's essay *To the Betrayed Inhabitants of the City and Colony of New-York*, an essay which described the many colonial grievances with Britain and the diminishing condition of the colonies in relation to their restrictions. McDougall described the poverty, infringement on personal liberties, and the terror imposed by British soldiers stationed in America in an attempt to convey American sentiments to the world while Britain would not listen.⁴⁹ Within his opening defense of personal liberties, he even specifies the role of the "American press...boldly employed in asserting the right of this country..."⁵⁰ McDougall was subsequently jailed under a charge of seditious libel, constituting one of the few full prosecutions under this law since the Zenger trial and retaliation to the Stamp Act.⁵¹

Resolution of the House of Lords, Relating to the North-Briton No. 45. May 28.

⁴⁷ Anonymous. To The Printer, *Boston Gazette*. June 10 1765.

⁴⁸ "McDougall, Alexander." In *American National Biography*, edited by John Arthur Garraty and Mark Christopher Carnes, 18. Vol. 15. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁴⁹ McDougal, Alex. 1770. From the New-York Gazette. *Pennsylvania Chronicle*. February 19.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Although he was eventually released under the new governor of New York, his prosecution became a rallying point for those in favor of more unrestricted speech. He was toasted as a defender of the liberty of the press and accounts of a dinner party hosted outside of his cell on the anniversary of the repeal of the Stamp Act were reprinted in papers throughout New England.⁵² By this point the idea of liberty of the press was well-established and fatefully intertwined within pre-Revolution patriotic sentiment. This would not be a necessary shift for the development of free press, however, until the enactment of the Townshend Duties in 1767 when true propaganda began to be printed.

The Townshend Duties and the subsequent retaliation to them by the colonies operated on a path very similar to the Stamp Act. The Duties taxed glass, led, paint dye, tea imports, and paper, including an especially high tax on the grades of paper which were not produced within the colonies. These were import taxes inherently different from the internal taxation of the Stamp Act, however, and were thus much more difficult to argue against. Although the press adopted a similar focus as before on the economic damage that would ensue through heavy taxation, there was a secondary drive to advocate action through propaganda.⁵³ This call to action is clearly demonstrated through a story published by Boston printers soon after the repercussions of the Townshend Duties were felt. It describes a letter written by a ‘Son of Liberty’ displayed on the liberty tree in the public square of Boston on the second anniversary of the repeal of the Stamp Act. The letter argued that although the Stamp Act had been repealed, the same grievances continued to exist regarding taxation for revenue, Judges of Admiralty courts, and stationed officers. It further argued for “brethren...to use every lawful mean to frustrate the

⁵² *New-York Gazette*. 1770. New-York, March 26. March 26.

⁵³ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 85-86.

wicked designs of our enemies... to unite against the evil and pernicious machinations of those who would destroy us.”⁵⁴ It is impossible to determine the authenticity of this story as a factual event as opposed to a fabrication to demonstrate a point. Yet the printing of it nearly five years after the demise of the Stamp Act demonstrates its use as an allegory revealing actions that should be taken against the Townshend Duties. The ability of the press to print such inciting material without repercussions further validates the extent to which the press had already won a great deal of liberty. Much like the Stamp Act retaliations, the press took this recognized freedom and ran with it.

The *Pennsylvania Chronicle* was at the forefront of retaliations to the Townshend Duties through printing an essay by lawyer John Dickenson under a pseudonym entitled “Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies”. Dickenson argued in the defense of the colonies demonstrating the unconstitutionality of the Townshend Duties through a calm command of legal rhetoric.⁵⁵ Although far from the fiery rhetoric that would become standard for many patriot presses, the message of the “Farmer” resounded in the minds of so many developing patriots that nearly every existing newspaper in the colonies reprinted it.⁵⁶ If the impact of this article was not clear enough in its massive spread throughout the colonies, the conscious effort by many Tory papers to halt its printing further demonstrates it. The traditional interpretation of non-partisan printing was understood by most printers as publishing any written matter as long as both sides were represented. Although many non-patriot papers attempted to claim bipartisanship through representing both sides, all papers, neutral or loyalist-oriented, who received payment from the crown, were banned from publishing several articles including the

⁵⁴ *Connecticut Courant*. 1769. Boston, March 19. May 8.

⁵⁵ *New-York Mercury*. 1767. Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania to the Inhabitants of the British Colonies. December 07.

⁵⁶ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 88-89.

“Farmers Letters”.⁵⁷ The division in printing demonstrated by the “Farmers Letters” not only reflects a rift among printers, but a fissure among popular opinion. As printers began to cater to these divided groups, it was necessary for the role of the press to be redefined once more.

LICENTIOUSNESS AND PROPAGANDA

Throughout the colonial period, the role of the press continued to be restricted to the printing of ‘truths’. Through the course of the Stamp Act and in the wake of the retaliations to the Townshend Duties, the extent of this liberty was reconsidered several times. For instance, some moderate newspapers argued against the right of the press to criticize or attack public figures; further arguing that often these claims go unproven if not entirely fabricated.⁵⁸ Contrasting views developed as to whether the paper was useful in advancing the greater good of the colony or just creating unrest through inciting and disobedient rhetoric.⁵⁹ The perspective of many loyalists did not change over the course of this transition, however, their ability to enforce restrictions had; therefore, they acted through the press itself. Adamantly loyalist papers argued that there had been a shift in the press since the Stamp Act from liberty to licentiousness. The abuse of the Mother country and government figures only created agitation, not actually promoted the good of the colonies.⁶⁰ Patriot papers continued to contest that the sometimes strong, one-sided arguments were not licentious, but simply the institution of a personal liberty expedited by anger. When writers were treated with the respect and attention they deserved, particularly from British audiences, the enflamed arguments would calm into rational discussion.

⁵⁷ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 94.

⁵⁸ *Providence Gazette*. 1767. From the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, &c. March 21.

⁵⁹ Botein, Stephen. "Printers and the American Revolution." In *The Press and the American Revolution*, edited by Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981), 12.

⁶⁰ Anonymous, Letter to the Printer of the *Providence Gazette*, *Essex Gazette*. December 20, 1768.

Restriction was not the answer and only heated debate.⁶¹ Once printers had solidified their role as engines of news and opinion, the only development remaining was a shift to an understood ‘free press’ in which even licentiousness and traditional sedition were free from restriction. This transformation was driven by the extreme partisanship and use of propaganda that developed in the wake of the Townshend Duties and the eve of Revolution in America.

There was a definitive change from the attempt at bipartisanship in the traditional colonial newspapers to a factionalized stance taken by most papers on the eve of Revolution. Traditionally, printers had been “studiously impartial” in America since there was less money in printing than there was in Britain and since most printers were prominent members of society who held multiple jobs or public positions.⁶² There was also no distinction between editor, publisher, and manual printer, thus these players became incredibly important in promoting ideas and propaganda at the onset of the Revolution; they were often even the same person.⁶³ Although colonists understood that all parties should be recognized in the press, printers often had to choose a side as attitudes factionalized lest they antagonize all of their subscribers. These printers, such as South Carolina’s Charles Crouch, soon came to find that this partisanship could be extremely lucrative, however.⁶⁴ Regardless of strictly economic factors, many patriot papers not only attacked Toryism, but neutrality arguing ‘if you’re not with us, you’re against us’.⁶⁵

⁶¹ *New-York Journal*. 1766. Virginia, October 25. November 27.

⁶² Botein, Stephen. "Printers and the American Revolution." In *The Press and the American Revolution*, edited by Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981), 16.

⁶³ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958) 60.

⁶⁴ Botein, Stephen. "Printers and the American Revolution." In *The Press and the American Revolution*, edited by Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981), 28-29.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 32-34.

Although the partisanship with which each paper identified set a backdrop for inciting argument, it was the initiation of a true propaganda movement that propelled the vehicle of truly free press.

Historians have heatedly debated whether the idea of Revolution was a unified ideology within the colonies or the product of a vociferous minority, but the importance of propaganda in either case is indisputable.⁶⁶ The propaganda movement itself was unique in history, however, since it was not organized or backed by a structured government or specific investors.⁶⁷ Rather, it was the work of several key personalities operating primarily out of Philadelphia and Boston to rally popular support for patriot ideals. Despite its unique quality, this was indeed a planned campaign, however, with projects directed towards Canada, Native Americans, African American slaves, and foreigners.⁶⁸ The propaganda campaign hinged on the strong personalities of several patriot contributors, who operated both individually, and through a patriot organization known as the Sons of Liberty.⁶⁹

Samuel Adams and his cousin politician John Adams were key figures in creating the political rhetoric being printed on the eve of the Revolution. Samuel Adams was a master of propaganda, writing hundreds of essays and articles under at least twenty-five pseudonyms. Having studied law and classics at Harvard and working as a merchant out of Boston for several years, Sam Adams was able to appeal to an enormous range of people through his propaganda.⁷⁰ The future president, John Adams, also wrote many essays concerning both the Stamp Act and

⁶⁶ Davidson, Philip Grant. *Propaganda and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 1941), xvi.

⁶⁷ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 20.

⁶⁸ Berger, Carl. *Broadsides and Bayonets; the Propaganda War of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), preface.

⁶⁹ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 93.

⁷⁰ Davidson, Philip Grant. *Propaganda and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 1941), 4-6.

the Townshend Duties, and based all of his arguments in fact and composed discussion unlike his notorious cousin, continuing to add to the patriot propaganda machine.⁷¹ John Adams frequently coauthored essays with Josiah Quincy, who frequently wrote extremely popular essays under the pseudonym Hyperion.⁷² Additional organized propaganda came from Boston patriots Joseph Warren who authored many letters and articles using striking language that often played to people's emotion, and from James Otis whose speeches were known to incite mob riots and were frequently reprinted.⁷³

Though there were many persons contributing to the dispersion of patriot propaganda, few groups influenced the press as much as the Sons of Liberty. This group of patriots from several colonies actually forbade the publication of anything that questioned the effectiveness of the rebellion; such as gains in Tory power or Patriot demonstrations that were disrupted. Although this control almost pushed the extent of free press to the opposite spectrum, it was short-lived; yet it clearly demonstrates the existence of a planned propaganda system.⁷⁴ This system was not only borne of many personalities, but conveyed in many ways, which worked to further expand the way in which the press was used in America.

Propaganda began to flow throughout the colonies via the printers in many different ways. While essays and editorials in the newspapers themselves were the most common, broadsides and handbills were easily circulated and effective. Broadsides, posters printed only on one side, were the favorite of propagandists such as Paul Revere, for their emotionally stirring

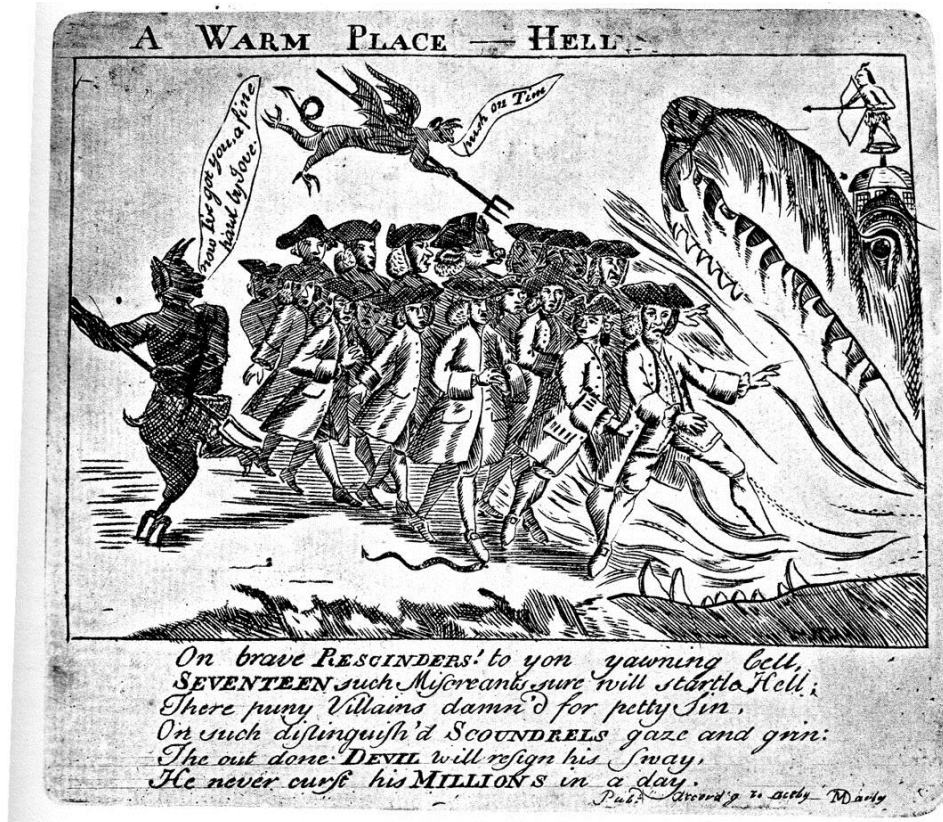
⁷¹ Davidson, Philip Grant. *Propaganda and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 1941), 4-6.

⁷² *Ibid*, 7-8.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 9-10.

⁷⁴ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 93.

and vivid accounts.⁷⁵ These broadsides were often accompanied by slogans which were even more easily circulated and retained, such as ‘Join or Die’ accompanying the infamous snake.⁷⁶



A broadside by Paul Revere depicting seventeen loyalists being forced into hell⁷⁷

Newspapers became vehicles for other unlikely forms of print propaganda also, such as prose, satire, or songs. Essayists submitted prose and satire through letters and editorials that appealed to a wide range of viewers.⁷⁸ Songs popularizing patriotic themes were written by Benjamin

⁷⁵ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 43.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷⁷ A Warm Place-Hell. Digital Image. Accessed 11/10/2012.

http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_wc5UxmrlJ_w/TLML2rJWO5I/AAAAAAAAAGE/qyFnt8noNM0/s1600/awarmplace.jp

⁷⁸ Botein, Stephen. "Printers and the American Revolution." In *The Press and the American Revolution*, edited by Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981), 47.

Franklin and Thomas Paine among others and reprinted in many newspapers.⁷⁹ Many printers began to use even more sources to propagate patriot rhetoric.

Almanacs were incredibly popular modes of print. Ben Franklin's and Ames' Almanac were selling up to 10,000 copies a year as early as 1732.⁸⁰ Though not political in intent, almanacs often contained political commentaries, public documents, and anecdotes with patriotic themes.⁸¹ The almanac often provided more subtle aids than simple opposition, for instance, the recipe for gunpowder provided by Ames' Almanac on the eve of Revolution.⁸² Printers also created political plays and magazines to promote them, however, none of which were remotely as successful as the inexpensive almanacs.⁸³ The print propaganda created and distributed by the patriots was reinforced through physical demonstrations such as the Boston Tea Party, hanging loyalists in effigy, and tar and feathering⁸⁴; all of which symbolically strengthened the significance of the print propaganda. The reach and influence of these print sources was undeniable. Even Royal Governor Ingersoll of New Jersey, where there were no newspaper presses, testified that the news print from Philadelphia and New York was stirring rebellious attitudes.⁸⁵ The range and power of impact of these sources allowed printers to achieve the final step towards deregulation, the ability to print with unparalleled freedom.

Printers were known for the partisanship of their papers and by the late 1760's it was commonplace to only print one side of a story. As the propaganda system grew, so did the fabrication of stories in order to fit the needs of the patriots. Although obvious fabrications

⁷⁹ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 37-39.

⁸⁰ Hofstadter, Richard, Daniel Aaron, and William Miller. *The United States; the History of a Republic*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 120.

⁸¹ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 41.

⁸² *Ibid*, 42.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 40-41.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*. 21-24

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 75.

would not be believed, it was easy for patriots to manipulate many reports to work at the emotions of a nation in the stirs of rebellion.⁸⁶ This propaganda ranged on a spectrum from exaggeration to manufactured facts. For instance, as talk of physical rebellion grew, some colonial papers printed news reports examining the extent to which Americans would be capable of fighting against British troops. They argued that the best British soldiers had already been sent to America and that the colonial frontiersmen had much more practice and proficiency with a rifle than any Britton.⁸⁷ The most outrageous lies were noticed and reciprocated by Tory papers as well. Governor Hutchinson of Massachusetts, though somewhat biased, claimed that as much as nine-tenths of a famous description of Redcoats landing was either entirely false or greatly overstated.⁸⁸ It is clear by the eve of the Revolution colonists were not only organizing, but gaining social power. The extent to which the printers had achieved freedom of speech through their presses was no small feat, and climaxed with the surplus of Revolutionary print propaganda.

CONCLUSION

Although the liberty of the press was an understood right established in Britain, free press developed very differently in America. The excessive use of seditious libel to restrict political criticisms throughout the colonies caused a backlash by the printers, culminating in the Zenger Trial. By acquitting John Peter Zenger, the jury set new standards for the acceptable restriction of the press in the colonies. The limitation on the ability to restrict the press through legislature allowed the press to much more openly criticize other government actions, such as the Stamp

⁸⁶ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 100.

⁸⁷ Berger, Carl. *Broadsides and Bayonets; the Propaganda War of the American Revolution*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), 125-126.

⁸⁸ Schlesinger, Arthur M. *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain 1764-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), 102.

Act. The printers responded against the taxation to such a great extent that colonial legislature feared restriction. This further cut down on the power of seditious libel and elevated the importance and role of the press as vehicles of fact and opinion. Further taxation and restrictions leading to rebellion necessitated an organized propaganda campaign, in which the printers were the key proponents. Through this the printers gained even greater power and established their freedom to print at will.

The restrictions to the modern press have undergone obvious modification since the Revolutionary War. Press is restricted commercially, against obscenity, and politically inciting nature. Even the concept of libel has survived through defamation restraints.⁸⁹ Yet each of these modifications has been the product of interpretation by the Supreme Court. The modern concept of free press, and the liberty that nearly every American practices on a daily basis, is still a product of the printers and propagandists of the American Revolution.

⁸⁹ United States. Congress. Congretional Research Service. *Freedom of Speech and Press: Exceptions to the First Amendment*. By Henry Cohen. October 16, 2009. Accessed November 15, 2012. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/95-815.pdf>.