

# The History of the Earliest English Newspapers, 1620 – 1642

Edward Haig

## Introduction

In *Westminster Tales*, their persuasive analysis of what they describe as ‘the twenty-first-century crisis in British political journalism’, Steven Barnett and Ivor Gaber identify four structural pressures which they consider to be pushing ‘critical political journalism’ inexorably towards what they regard as a less desirable ‘cowed, politically-dependent journalism’.<sup>1</sup> The four pressures are: the changing nature of the relationship between political journalists and formal political sources; the impact of media ownership; the unprecedented growth of media outlets; and the changing nature of the journalism profession. While scholarly research and popular interest in the field of media studies tends understandably to focus on the present and future of the media, I believe it is regrettable that far less consideration is given to their past.<sup>2</sup> For the past is not quite such a different country as we tend to imagine, and they do not do things so very differently there. There are, for example, some remarkable parallels between the earliest days of the English newspaper and the phenomenal growth of the Internet in recent years, particularly in terms of the sorts of questions raised by both about freedom of expression, intellectual property rights, responsibility and regulation (and at a more practical level, how to make a profit). Indeed the four pressures identified by Barnett and Gaber are far from new. They are fundamentally as old as journalism itself and apply equally well to the difficulties faced by British political journalism at the very beginning of its history in the seventeenth century as to its crisis in the twenty-first. Thus, by attending to the origins of the press in Britain students of the media can not only gain an historical perspective on how the media came to be the way they are today but also use that history as a case study with which to develop a more general theoretical understanding of the role of the media in society. As a necessary precondition to achieving this wider goal, in this paper I provide a detailed account of the early English newspapers. I begin by describing the way in which the first English news periodicals grew out of a Continental tradition of news publications. I then indicate how later, in response to domestic impulses, they rapidly developed in a wholly original direction. The paper then concludes with a discussion of the publishing career of Nathaniel Butter, the most important of the founding

fathers of the newspaper in England.<sup>3</sup>

### **Prehistory of the English Newspaper**

The first fact likely to strike students of the history of print journalism in England is not how early it developed, but how late. For it was not until the 1620s, some 150 years after William Caxton set up his press in Westminster, that we find the first proto-newspapers appearing on the bookstalls clustered around St Paul's Cathedral. The reason for the delay however has an all too contemporary ring to it: the desire of those at the top of society to maintain a monopoly on power/knowledge through control of the means of its production, distribution and exchange. Thus during the intervening period we find a succession of English monarchs variously issuing ordinances and proclamations against 'heretical and seditious' books, setting up various systems of religious and political censorship, and attempting to limit the numbers of printers through the licensing of presses. Particularly harmful for the development of an indigenous journalism was a 1586 decree by the Star Chamber which made it illegal to publish British news in Britain. This decree was still being enforced by the Stationers' Company in 1618 at the outbreak of the Thirty Years War. However, that war aroused intense interest in England not only amongst the ruling elite but also amongst the ambitious new protestant middle classes, particularly those merchants who had trade links with the continent. This popular demand for news of the war was met, from about the end of 1620, in the form of printed broadsheets known as 'corantos'. These were produced in Amsterdam, at that time the leading center of journalism in Protestant Europe, and were at first nothing more than translations of existing Dutch corantos. These in turn were simply unedited compilations of reports communicated in the form of manuscript letters written by the postmasters of the major European cities.

The earliest surviving English language coranto was published in Amsterdam on 2 December 1620 by Pieter van den Keere, a successful Dutch map-engraver who had previously lived and worked in London and had several contacts in the English printing and bookselling world. It was an untitled single sheet of folio size, printed on both sides, which began with the distinctly unprepossessing heading *The new tydings out of Italie are not yet com.*<sup>4</sup> This coranto is composed of six separate reports, laid out on the page in two columns. They are not in chronological order but seem rather to have been laid out simply in the order in which they came to the printer's hand. Although not referred to as such at the time, the main topic of most of the reports was what became known afterwards as the Battle of the White Mountain. This took place outside Prague

on 8 November between the forces of Ferdinand, the Catholic Habsburg Emperor, and the army of the Calvinist King Frederick V of Bohemia. Victory for the Imperial side in this battle effectively ended Bohemian independence. This in turn threatened to draw England into the conflict because Frederick was married to Elizabeth ('The Winter Queen'), only daughter of James I, a fact which helps to explain why this phase of the war was of especial interest to patriotic English protestants. The earliest dated report in this coranto (though the second in the order of layout on the front page) is a report from shortly before the battle, headed *Out of Prage, the 5 of November*, which begins with the following 'lead' paragraph:

Three days agone are passed by, a mile from this Cittie 6000 Hungarians (chosen out Soldiers) under the General Rediferens, which are gon to our Head-camp, & the Enimie lieth yet near unto ours by Rackonits, though the crie goeth, that the enimie caused all his might to com together, to com this wayes against Prage, if that comes to passe it shall not run of without blowes, the which might be revealed with in few dayes.<sup>5</sup> (Frank 5)

Although this story is very possibly the first ever item of printed news in English, to the modern reader this brief paragraph appears to be a model of concision, addressing with admirable economy the modern journalists' key questions of who, what, when, where and why? In what might today be seen as a clever marketing ploy, it also ends with a suitably appetite-whetting hint of further gory details to come for anyone willing to buy the next issue. In fact the ploy, if such it was, was not so very clever after all since readers did not need to wait for the next issue: another report on the same page, headed *From Cadan in Bohemia, 4 mile from Raconits, the 12. November*, gives the following account of the battle:

From Solts is certaine advise that the Emperours folk have made them selves with all their might out of their Camp, & taken their way to wards Praghe, like as they weare then com to the long mile, but as the King understand such, he is broken up with his army, and com to the log mile before the enimie, where they have had a very strong Battelle & on both sides more than 6000 men slaine, though most on the Kings side, also hath the enimie gotten of the King som peeces of Ordnance and waggens with amunitie, so that the King must retire back to Praghe, and the enimie to the Weissenberg, there he lies yet and roves from thence to the Leut Maritscher Crais unto Brix, hath taken in, Trebnits, Pielan & Dux, also laid folk upon Leutmarischer Slainer, and Launer passages, that the Passage upon Prage is wholly taken away, and this day is com heere in a certain Person that brings tydings unto our Magistrat, that berwixt Sonnenviied and Patronit, where the enimie hath lien are found som certaine 1000 dead Bodies, & on the other side there King lay also som certaine 1000. dead bodies, what is com to passe berwixt both we shal shortly heare. (5)

A number of observations may be made about the generic features of this report which mark it out as being quite typical of these earliest corantos. Firstly, although it is dated four days after the battle, there are no details given of the encounter itself, other than that it was ‘very strong’, that a large number of men were killed, and that it seems to have gone badly for the Bohemian king. It would appear that the reporter and his – in those unenlightened times postmasters were invariably male – informants were kept, or kept themselves, well away from the front line (the practice of embedding having not yet been conceived), and there is no attempt to engage the reader in the drama of the conflict through the use of eye-witness accounts. Another possible reason for the report’s low-key tone is that, since this battle represented a significant loss for the Protestant cause it is quite likely that, then as now, there was some desire to downplay bad news. Secondly, to an even greater extent than with the earlier report, and again in a manner quite characteristic of the genre, the correspondent assumed that his readers were in possession of a great deal of background information in terms of persons, places and, above all, causes and underlying issues of the war, without an understanding of which the news could make little sense. This rather lofty and elliptical style of writing is in keeping with the routine, semi-official nature of the postmasters’ reports, which were primarily intended for military and political leaders and other members of a discourse community already *au fait* with the overall situation. The problem of intelligibility was exacerbated for English readers by the fact that these reports were verbatim translations of originals intended for a Dutch readership. Further indicative of this genre is the almost complete absence in this report of concern for the lives of ordinary people or any mention of the ‘human interest’ aspects of the war. Neither is there any trace of wit or even polemic to relieve the matter-of-fact tone. Clearly, at this stage in his career, van den Keere did not consider providing such editorial embellishments to be part of his job.

But, of course, despite the reports’ air of detached neutrality it cannot escape the fact that no act of communication however simple occurs without some degree of rhetorical/ideological spin. The ideal of unbiased reporting, which a surprising number of journalists still claim to aspire to today, remains just that: an ideal more honoured in the breach than the observance. Point of view cannot be avoided (since even a posture of strict neutrality is just one among many other ideological options) and in this report for example the classification of participants into ‘us’ and ‘them’ is clearly delineated. There is significance too in the very selection and juxtaposition of information, since what is not said can be just as significant as what is. Thus, the very fact that in this coranto, as in all such Dutch-printed English corantos of the period, there are no reports of Dutch affairs

indicates that the men who produced and sold them were careful not to offend those who had the power to close down the presses and prosecute vendors, which is of course the explanation for the even more glaring omission of any news about England. One last related point to note here is that the correspondent is unnamed, another standard feature of these corantos, which raises questions of authorship, authority and authenticity which in these days of unregulated bloggers and instant, anonymous web communication have once again become highlighted in debates about the media. Concerning the question of authority, the same coranto carries two further battle reports, both sent over one week later from Cologne, a city which lay on the post route from Prague to Amsterdam and which one would therefore expect to have furnished a more reliable and complete account. However, in the first report, dated 21 November, we read simply that:

Heere is tydings, that between the King of Bohemia & the Emperours folke hath beene a great Battel about Prage, but because there is different writing & speaking there uppon, so cannot for this time any certainty thereof be written, but must wayte for the next Post. (5)

While we may appreciate this correspondent's admirable respect for the principle of corroboration and the importance of sifting the pure factual nuggets from the dross of rumour, it is quite possible that his scrupulousness was not purely based on a nascent sense of professional ethics: for as the second report dated three days later suggests, there may have been money involved:

Letters out of Neurenburghe of the 20 of this present, make mention, that they had advise from the Borders of Bohemia, that there had beene a very great Battel by Prage, between the King (the Duke of Beyern, & many 1000 slaine on both sides, but that the Duke of Beyern should have any folke with in Prage, is yet uncertaine, there uppon under the Merchants with in Neurenberge are laid many 100. Florins that the Emperour, nor the Duke of Beyeren have no folke with in Prage. The cause that here comes no certainty thereof, is this, That all passages are so beset, & so dangerous to travaile, that it is to wondered at, & not enough to be writte of, what roveing, spoyling and killing is done dayly uppon all wayes. (5)

Betting on the outcome of the battle may not seem the most godly way for pious puritan businessmen to show support for the war effort, but this kind of information may have been particularly interesting to readers in England since similar practices were not unknown at the Royal Exchange in London. And from a merchant's point of view there is perhaps little moral difference between gambling on the vicissitudes of war and speculating on the potential threat to profits caused by any other Act of God. Certainly, van den Keere's venture seems to have found favour with his English readers:

between 2 December 1620 when the above issue was published and 18 September 1621 when publication appears to have ceased, he produced fifteen issues of his coranto. It was not a weekly publication – the interval between issues varied from four to forty-six days – but it gave a reasonably regular, complete and reliable account of the Thirty Years War during this period.<sup>6</sup> One person with whom van den Keere and his competitors did not find favour was James I, who in January 1621 urged the Dutch authorities, albeit without much immediate success, to ban the export of corantos to Britain. However, it appears that over the next few months the supply of corantos reaching Britain did slowly diminish and, since nature abhors a vacuum, it can surely be no coincidence that in the spring of 1621 the first English coranto actually printed in England appeared.

### **The English Corantos**

The first English coranto was published in London by a printer living in ‘Popes-head Alley’ in Cornhill called Thomas Archer (Dahl 49). Although their existence can be deduced from contemporary documents, none of his publications from this time appear to have survived and apart from the fact that they were translations of Dutch texts almost no other details are known about them. What is known however is that in September that year Archer was imprisoned for publishing a coranto without a license.<sup>7</sup> And it was not only official displeasure that his corantos incurred. Astonishingly, as early as August 1621, this embryo of the English popular press seems to have acquired a reputation for unreliability. In a letter from that month written by the aristocratic John Chamberlain to the English Ambassador in The Hague we read:

... there is come out a new proclamation against lavish and licentious talking in matters of state, either at home or abroad, which the common people know not how to understand, nor how far matters of state may stretch or extend; for they continue to take no notice of yt, but print every weeke (at least) corantos with all manner of newes, and as strange stuffe as any we have from Amsterdam.<sup>8</sup>

Fortunately for the future of English newspapers, not everyone shared Chamberlain’s point of view. At almost the same time that Archer’s press was being closed down by the authorities, a certain ‘N.B.’ is recorded as having obtained ‘a license to print [corantos] and sell them, honestly translated out of the Dutch.’<sup>9</sup> In all likelihood the licensee in question was a certain Nathaniel Butter, a man who had been involved in book publishing since 1604 and whom we shall find to have taken a leading role in the development of the English press over the next twenty years.<sup>10</sup> The earliest surviving copy of a coranto

bearing his initials is *Corante, or, News from Italy, Germany, Hungarie, Spaine and France*, dated 24 September 1621 (Dahl 51). This appears to have been the first of what became a series of single-sheet corantos of which seven have survived, the last one dated 22 October although the series continued until the spring or early summer of 1622. These corantos represent the oldest surviving periodical news publications printed in Britain, and Frank argues that if Butter was N.B. then he and Archer deserve the title of ‘England’s first newspapermen’.<sup>11</sup>

### **The First Newsbooks of 1622**

The year 1622 is significant in the history of the English press because it was the year in which the first examples of a new type of publication appeared: one that was to have a quite literally revolutionary impact on English journalism and English society: the newsbook (Dahl 55). After a break in production of about two or three months, and in collaboration with a syndicate of other printers and booksellers, prominent amongst whom were Thomas Archer and one Nicholas Bourne, Nathaniel Butter began producing a new weekly compilation of foreign news. The innovation that made the newsbook more popular than single-sheet corantos was that it was formatted in a more convenient quarto book size and consisted of from eight to twenty-four pages (that is, between one and three folded sheets). This size was more familiar to contemporary English print culture than the larger Continental folio size used for the corantos. Thenceforth people began to refer to them as ‘books of news’ or ‘newsbooks’ and until 1665 this was the standard format for English newspapers.<sup>12</sup>

Apart from the new format, these earliest newsbooks displayed two characteristics which showed that they were evolving away from the continental corantos and towards a form more similar to the newspapers of our own day. Firstly, the presence of an editorial hand becomes more clearly detectable, as seen in the case of one editor who mused to his readers that it might be helpful if he were ‘to muster the Newes, which belongs to the same place, as it were into one Armie’ which would allow them to ‘receive the occurrences all together’. From comments like these in the early newsbooks we get a stronger sense of the English newspapers as forming a functioning public sphere in the Habermasian sense, with a close and interactive relationship between publishers, printers, editors, correspondents and readers, than was then to be found on the continent. The contact manifests itself most clearly in the large number of what Dahl terms ‘editorial notices’ addressed to readers which were frequently included alongside the reports in the newsbooks and which afford a fascinating glimpse into the world of the newspaper

men and their readers.<sup>13</sup> The second characteristic that distinguished the English newsbook from its European counterpart was the invention of the headline. Elegantly laid out in large type on the front page and sometimes accompanied by simple woodcut illustrations or designs, these headlines drew readers' attention to the most important or exciting items of news to be found within. This was a development which, in Dahl's words, revealed evidence of 'a truly journalistic inventive genius' in the English character and put the English publishers 'miles ahead of almost all their continental colleagues.'<sup>14</sup>

These headlines constitute a fascinating genre in themselves. Most of them announced reports of the various battles, sieges and activities of the principal figures in the war. For example, the following appeared in the 2 September 1622 issue: 'Two great battailes very lately fought, [in the second of which] *the Duke of Brunswicke behaved himself most valiantly, having three horses slain under him*' (Dahl 80). The heavy diet of war reports is leavened however by the occasional appearance of an item of more 'exotic' news like the one from 15 July, headed: 'The strangling and death of the great *Turke*, and his two sonnes. With the strange preservation and deliverance of his uncle Mustapha from *perishing in prison, with hunger and thirst*, ... A wonderfull story, and the like never heard of in our *moderne times*' (69). This was one of the earliest (and less fanciful) of the 'wonderful and strange news' stories to appear in a newsbook. Although they had been a popular feature of the sort of one-off 'relations of news' sold as broadsheets and pamphlets at country fairs for a hundred years or more, they had not hitherto been used, as this one seems to have been used here, as an attention-grabbing 'extra' to the main news. Whether or not that was indeed the reason for its inclusion, at the end of this newsbook the editor tempts readers to buy the next week's issue with the promise that it would include more details of this tall Turkish tale.

Particularly during the winter months when there was generally a lull in the fighting, but at other times also when news of the war was thin for various reasons such as the delay due to bad weather of ships bearing news from the Continent, editors grew anxious about losing the interest and hence custom of their readers. They seem to have had a clear idea of what their public wanted to read and to have fretted when they could not supply it. In one of two issues published on 26 July 1622, we find the following rather defensive announcement:

This Weeke you shall heare of no fighting, nor further trouble, then you know already: yet the dayly Letters affoord matter sufficient both of pleasure and varietie, all which are translated for thy contentment, being most of them in Dutch. As for such as are written to the Marchants in *London* from foreine Parts, according to their mixture of Businesse and Newes, I have

contracted them, as you see, and culled them out, to give you notice of the affaires of *Europe*, and what is likely to be the issue of these troubles. But whereas you expect, and that with great longing, the *Businesse of the Palatinate*: in this time of cessation, you must not looke for fighting every day, nor taking of Townes; but as they happen, you shall know. (Dahl 72)

Finally, one other type of report which we find in these early newsbooks concerns a matter which seems have always been a favourite of the inhabitants of the British Isles, namely, the weather. For example, a headline for the issue dated 4 September promises ‘a true and certaine report, of the lamentable shipwracke which hapned at *Plimoth* ... and other great harme done elsewhere, by lightning and thunder on the same day,’ (81). This report is highly unusual in that it deals with an item of ‘home news’ such as was still strictly forbidden at this time. Perhaps it was either overlooked by the censor or was deemed to constitute no indelible stain on the king’s honour. The lack of more serious domestic political news however was a point on which the newsbook publishers were perennially sensitive. One undated issue from mid or late March, consisting of news from the Palatinate expressly described as being ‘according to faithfull and honest letters, *sent over since the beginning of March, and now published for the satisfaction of every true English heart*’, was unusual in being anonymous, with nothing to identify either printer or publisher. As Dahl observes, this was probably a deliberate decision since the letters included in this issue were sharply critical of the domestic news blackout.<sup>15</sup> For example, one passage reads, ‘I understand by many messengers, that your *Corantos in England* are so translated, and obsequious to the Dutch Coppies, that they neuer mention any exploit of the English, nor vouchsafe to attribute the glory of any enterprise unto them,’ and another states that, ‘There are other things, of which I could write, but I am sure you dare not publish’ (57).

### **The Newsbooks of Nathaniel Butter, 1622 – 1642**

In October 1622 the news syndicate now established around the central partnership of Nathaniel Butter and Nicholas Bourne took one further step towards establishing their newsbooks as the first true predecessors of the modern newspaper. From this time onwards they not only gave dates to their publications but also assigned serial numbers to them (86). Numbering the successive issues helped to keep up sales by fostering among the reading public the perception of news (and the consumption of it in the form of newsbooks) as an ongoing activity. Paradoxically, it was this invention of numbering that converted the ephemeral newsbook into the permanent archive of history’s first draft. Thenceforth, in association with a constantly changing group of fellow publishers

(forming what amounted to a state-sanctioned cartel) and in the face of hostile government scrutiny, unreliable posts, bad news from the wars, complaints from readers and the barbs of satirists and critics, Butter managed to produce a total of fourteen series of foreign news newsbooks over the course of the next twenty years. Although these newsbooks often referred to themselves as ‘Weekly’ in their titles or headings, they were published at quite irregular intervals and never on a particular day of the week. How far this was due to the publishers’ inefficiency or to factors beyond their control such as trouble at sea (a frequent excuse which could include anything from storms to pirates) is not clear. But despite all the difficulties Butter had to contend with, it was not until the dramatic developments of the English Civil War drew the attention of his readers away from foreign affairs and towards news from the domestic scene – at just the moment when the breakdown in censorship made the publication of domestic news newsbooks possible – that he was forced to give up business. The following chart summarizes the details of each of the fourteen series of newsbooks, giving the approximate dates for the first and last numbers, the known or estimated total number of separate numbers published (in parentheses) and a brief comment indicating the most salient textual and/or contextual features.<sup>16</sup> In the remainder of this section I shall comment on some of the more noteworthy features in more detail.

Ser. 1.	Oct. 1622 – Oct. 1623	(50)	Almost all numbers consist of 24 pages. Content generally impersonal.
Ser. 2.	Oct. 1623 – Dec. 1624	(47)	Editorial problems. Syndicate fragments. Archer’s rival series. First advertisement.
Ser. 3.	Dec. 1624 – Jan. 1626	(50)	Butter and Bourne use ‘ <i>printed for Mercurius Britannicus</i> ’ as a re-branding ploy.
Ser. 4.	Jan. 1626 – Jan. 1627	(50)	Similar to Series 3 but average number of pages decreased to 16.
Ser. 5.	Feb. 1627 – Feb. 1628	(50)	Butter and Bourne revert to using their own names.
Ser. 6.	Mar. 1628 – Dec. 1629	(50)	News of Catholic victories and Protestant defeats causes slowdown in business.
Ser. 7.	Jan. 1630 – Nov. 1631	(50)	Sluggish start but business improves in 1631 when King of Sweden joins war.
Ser. 8.	Nov. 1631 – Oct. 1632	(50)	Continued Protestant successes and new editor boost sales: climax of partnership.
Ser. 9.	Oct. 1632	(1)	Star Chamber decree leads to immediate stop of publication.
Ser. 10.	Dec. 1638 – Jul. 1639	(100)	New 4 page multi-part format. Officially-controlled content, lacks former style.

Ser. 11. Aug. 1639 – Mar. 1640	(100)	Quality declines. Business poor. Bourne leaves partnership.
Ser. 12. Mar. 1640 – Feb. 1641	(50)	Butter responds to customer complaints by reverting to pre-Series 10 format.
Ser. 13. Feb. 1641 – Sept. 1641?	(32+?)	Steady decline into worsening quality with poor typography, proofreading, etc.
Ser. 14. Jan. 1642 – Dec. 1642?	(?)	Unnumbered and largely uncoordinated. Butter quits publishing, later dies in poverty.

During the early days of the syndicate, there is evidence to suggest that it was in competition with at least one other newsbook publisher for ‘scoops’ of foreign news and that, as they strove for a dominant position in the market their business practices may not have been of the most ethical. Shortly after beginning production of the first series, part of the contents of a newsbook they registered with the Stationers’ Company on 3 November 1622 was found to have infringed the copyright of one Nathaniel Newbery. The Court of the Stationers’ Company ‘ordered that Mr. Butter, Mr. Bourne, Mr Downes, Mr. Sheffard, Tho. Archer paie to Nathaniel Newsbarie 8s,’ (87). With the second series, although their ethics may have improved, the syndicate was still looking for ways to increase profits, and in 1624 they hit on an idea that was to have an incalculably great impact on every facet of the media ever after: advertising. Thus, on the last page of the 16 September number we find, filling up a space (which in an inversion of modern terminology we might refer to as the ‘ad hole’) what is very probably the first ever English newspaper advertisement:

In the last printed News of September 11, I told you there could be no perfect description of the siege of *Breda* ... since this, is come over a perfect description of the same, the substance whereof is formerly set downe in this Relation. I doe propose likewise to cut the Map, wherein you may with the eye behold the siege, in a manner, as lively as if you were an eye-witnesse: you may not expect this Map this six dayes. (127)

While this advertisement may appear somewhat unpolished by modern copywriting standards (‘Coming soon!’ instead of ‘you may not expect’ perhaps), it shows how conscious the editor was of the truism that a picture paints a thousand words. Although for a variety of cultural and technological reasons written reports have remained the bread and butter of newspapers up to the present day, the desire for multimodality was clearly present right from the beginning.<sup>17</sup> As too was the desire for accuracy, motivated either ethically as constituting a good in itself or more prosaically as a way to avoid complaints from readers. On the very bottom of the same page, just below the map

advertisement, we find the following correction to a report of the Prince of Orange's attack on the Westphalian town of Cleves: 'Errata. *In page 8 for, hath razed the Castle and Towne down to the ground: read, hath razed the Castle downe to the ground,*' (127). This must have come as a great relief to any readers with friends (or goods) in the town. It is interesting to note that, in a manner still common in newspapers today, the version of the story that was originally puffed in the front page headline and printed in the main body of the paper was more sensational than the truer version slipped in quietly, without apology, at the end. One other possible reason for the insertion of this errata notice is that whatever else Butter's syndicate may have done to improve their newsbooks since the days of Thomas Archer's first corantos, the negative images of popular news and the men who produced it that were already current in those days seem by the mid-1620s to have developed into fully-fledged stereotypes. Foremost in the ranks of their critics was Ben Jonson, whose 1626 play *The Staple of News* depicts 'news-mongers' as money-grabbing, dishonest and ignorant, and their news-addicted customers as gullible fools. In addition to these more general insults to the press, in an age so fond of punning names it was inevitable that Butter's name would attract mockery. Among the writers who apparently could not resist the temptation was the poet Abraham Holland, who wrote the following lines in 1625 in his *Inquisition of Paper Persecutors*:

But to behold the wals  
*Butter'd* with Weekly Newes compos'd in Pauls,  
 By some decaied *Captaine*, or those Rooks,  
 Whose hungry braines compile prodigious *Books*,

[...]

To see such *Batter* everie weeke besmeare  
 Each publike post, and Church dore, and to heare  
 These *shamefull lies*, would make a man, in spight  
 Of Nature, turne *satyrist* and write  
 Revenging lines, against these shamelesse men,  
 Who thus torment both *Paper, Presse, and Pen*.

Here both 'Butter' and 'Batter' refer to Nathaniel Butter, while the 'decaied Captiane' is Thomas Gainsford, the syndicate's most acclaimed editor who had been a captain in the army.<sup>18</sup> The suggestion that newsbooks used to 'besmeare' both 'publike post' and 'Church dore' provides, if correct, a rare insight into how people actually used newsbooks. The way in which newsbooks were regularly sent as an accompaniment to private letters

from Londoners to their friends and relatives in the country has been relatively well documented, but as far as I know this is the only indication we have that they were posted up for communal public consumption in this manner. It is of course some measure of the popularity of newsbooks that they attracted this sort of criticism and the members of the syndicate may well have taken it as a backhanded complement *à la* Oscar Wilde. Nevertheless, the fact that at about this time Butter and Bourne stopped printing their own names on their newsbooks, choosing instead the joint *nom de plume* of *Mercurius Britannicus*, is perhaps an indication that at least the name-calling wrangled. Looking beyond simply personal reasons however, this change of name might be taken to represent an early attempt at a re-branding exercise since the name seems designed to associate their humble publication with the prestigious diplomatic journal *Mercurius Gallobelgicus* which was still being published in Europe at that time. When the Civil War and the consequent breakdown in censorship produced the great explosion of domestic newsbooks in the 1640s, so many of them had similar *Mercurius* titles that the generic term for all such publications soon became ‘mercuries’ (Raymond 11).

While it seems clear that the literary elite enjoyed satirizing the newsbook men and their middle-class readers, we have tantalizingly little evidence of what the ‘middling sort’ (as they were known in those days) themselves felt about their (approximately) weekly indulgence. However, in the one surviving copy of a newsbook from the fourth series, dated 24 August 1626, a contemporary hand has left some marginal comments which reveal something of the author’s religious and moral principles. Besides a report of Protestant victories he notes ‘good, yf true’, a remark which might also indicate the sort of pinch of salt with which readers necessarily took their news. And after a report of the exploits of the mercenary leader Count Mansfield who, having captured a town, ‘annoyed none of the inhabitants, but tooke onely their weapons from them’ the reader writes, ‘fayr warres’.<sup>19</sup>

There is no doubting that news of the continental ‘warres’ was what readers most wanted. Not all of them might have been as particular as the above reader about the fairness of the fighting, but what they *did* want was news of Protestant victories. Unfortunately for the syndicate, from 1628 until the mighty King of Sweden, Gustavus Adolphus and his formidable army swept down into northern Europe and began harrying the Imperial forces in 1631, the Catholics had very much the upper hand in the war and good news from the Protestant side was scarce (and frequently turned out to be untrue). Hence these years saw a marked decline in the demand for newsbooks. Such were the financial difficulties of the syndicate at this time that in a number of issues from the

sixth and seventh series we find plaintive editorial notices such as the following, from 16 July 1630, which reads in part:

This yeare 1630. is like to produce more action in Christendome then was this hundred yeares; and more Newes is like to come to our hands. If wee may receive better encouragement then we have done, for we have lost by our publication, both our labour and a great deale of money this tenne moneths, which was the cause we published scarce one a moneth; It being most mens desire to heare of action, which seldome fals out in the Winter. We presume we shall now fit their humour, with action enough every weeke if their purses be as ready to pay as wee shall be to publish, (Dahl 167-8)

Although in fact 1630 was not such a good year for the Protestant cause, the tide of fortune did at last turn in 1631. With the Swedish king's string of military victories and the prospect of King Frederick and Queen Elizabeth of Bohemia being restored to the Palatinate throne, the syndicate's fortunes reached their apogee. Hence we find that with its eighth series, the production of newsbooks attained record levels. Fifty newsbooks were published in only ten months and on three occasions two numbers were printed on the same day (187). But the good times for the syndicate were to prove short-lived. In September 1632, having produced just one number of what was to have been their ninth series, they (along with all other newsbook publishers) were summarily forced to stop their presses by a decree issued by the King's Council.<sup>20</sup> Charles I, who was even more averse to public discussion of news than his father, James I, was particularly irritated at this time by the unfavourable comparisons that his subjects were making between his own indecision and lack of charisma and the gallantry and seemingly unstoppable success of Gustavus Adolphus: comparisons that were facilitated, if not actually encouraged, by the newsbooks. The terms of the decree were precise and severe:

Upon Consideracion had at the Board of the greate abuse in the printing & publishing of the ordenary Gazetts and Pamphletts of newes from forraign partes, And upon signification of his majesties expresse pleasure and Comaund for the present suppressing of the same, It was thought fitt and hereby ordered that all printing and publishing of the same be accordingly suppress and inhibited. And that as well Nathaniell Butter & Nicholas Bourne Booke Sellers, under whose names the said Gazetts have beene usually published, as all other Stationers, Printers and Booke Sellers, presume not from henceforth to print publish or sell any of the said Pamphletts, &c, as they will answer the Contrary at their perils. (221)

After this decree, and despite the fact that Gustavus Adolphus was killed in battle just one month later, there followed a period of six barren years during which no

newsbooks were printed in England. During this period of media blackout Butter and Bourne made several attempts to have the decree annulled, even going so far as to bribe a senior government official, but all to no avail. A Dutch coranto publisher, Jan van Hilten tried to fill the resulting gap in the market by exporting or smuggling English newsbooks to England, but evidence suggests that the venture did not prosper for longer than a year.<sup>21</sup> In 1637, as relations between Charles and his people steadily deteriorated, even stronger censorship rules were introduced, this time not just for newsbooks but for all forms of printing. These involved appointing a licenser for each type of publication and stricter penalties for offenders. Three men who were tried and found guilty by the Star Chamber for daring to attack the episcopacy in print were branded, pilloried, had their ears cut off, fined a large sum of money and sentenced to life imprisonment. Given the circumstances, then, it is somewhat of a mystery as to why, on 20 December 1638, Butter and Bourne were awarded an exclusive Royal Patent,

for the imprinting & publishing of all matter of History or Newes of any forraine place or Kingdome since the first beginning of the late German warres to this present, And also for the translating setting forth imprinting & publishing in the English tongue all Newes, Novells, Gazetts Currantos or Occurrences that concerne forraine partes &c, for the term of XXI<sup>ty</sup> yeares.  
(223)

Whatever the reason,<sup>22</sup> it is clear that they had foreknowledge of this patent since on the very day that it was granted they published the first number of a new series of newsbooks. This tenth series was quite unlike all previous series in appearance and mode of production. Each number consisted of only four pages, but now three or even four separate numbers were published on the same day. They relied heavily on indifferent translations of Dutch corantos and less care was taken with editorial matters such as layout, typography or headlines than before. One particularly drab number from January 1639 was simply headed ‘Ordinary weekly currantoes from Holland’. All of these changes were motivated by economic factors rather than aesthetic or journalistic considerations since it was hoped that customers could be induced to pay more money for their news if it was doled out to them in this piecemeal format. As for the news itself, the most obvious sign of the closer official scrutiny that Butter and Bourne were now obliged to work under was that each issue clearly stated that it was printed ‘by permission’ or ‘with priviledge’. Under the watchful eye of the censor at this time (though not later, as noted below) the style of the reports was dry and monotonous and it is hardly surprising that the series was not a success. The next series, begun in August 1638, fared no better and,

as a consequence, somewhere around the end of the year Nicholas Bourne left the partnership. In an attempt to revive sales, for the twelfth series (March 1640 to February 1641) Butter reverted to the old format and undertook to only publish one number at a time. This was clearly a decision forced on him by his customers and the dire straits in which he found himself: in one of the early numbers in this series he addressed his readers in the following frankly worded editorial notice:

*Gentlemen, We have againe reduced the methode of printing the forreigne weekly Avisoes, into two sheets, and do promise, for the content of the buyer, to sell them at a cheaper Rate, if a competent number shall be vented weekly, to recompence the charge, we shall continue them; if not, we shall be forced to put a period to the Presse, and leave every man to the pleasing of his own fansie, by a more uncertaine restrained way of private letters, or verball news, which cannot but suffer much alteration, according to the affection of the Relater. Farewell. (246)*

Unfortunately the times were against publishers of ‘forreigne weekly Avisoes’ as a succession of domestic crises crowded out all other news. April 1640 saw the fiasco of the Short Parliament. By October the Scots had defeated the English in the second Bishops’ War and had overrun the north of England almost as far as York. Charles was obliged to summon the Long Parliament which promptly answered him by impeaching his two most important supporters, the Earl of Strafford and Archbishop Laud. As the king’s power waned, the allegiance of the Stationers’ Company began to shift crucially towards Parliament and the people and this inevitably contributed to the loosening of censorship. This was to result in the huge proliferation of *domestic* newsbooks (and greater freedom of expression more generally) that occurred between 1641 and 1655, but for Butter it simply opened the door to further unwelcome competition and devalued his Royal Patent. It is not hard to imagine that relations between him and the censor of newsbooks must have been extremely fraught at this time. After a hiatus in production of almost one month, he returned once more to the fray. And in a newsbook dated 11 January 1641 he wrote the following remarkable editorial notice which offers us a rare glimpse into his troubled affairs at that time:

*Courteous Reader: Wee had thought to have given over printing our Forraigne avisoes, for that the Licenser (out of partiall affection) would not oftentimes let passe apparent truth, and in other things (oftentimes) so crosse and alter which made us almost weary of Printing, but he being vanished (and that Office fallen upon another, more understanding in these forraine affaires, an as you will finde more candid.) We are again (by the favour of his Mejestie and the State) resolved to goe on in Printing if we shall finde the World to give a better acception*

*of them (then of late) by their Weekly buying them. (251)*

One can but wonder what led the previous licenser to be so partial, not to mention the precise circumstances in which he ‘vanished’ (or perhaps, more sinisterly, ‘was vanished’). If his departure from office was on account of his Royalist sympathies, was his successor a Parliamentary appointee and if so would that necessarily dispose him to being ‘more undestanding’ of ‘forraine affaires’? The addition of the phrase ‘and the State’ suggests that Butter was consciously trying to ingratiate himself with Parliament, or at least to hedge his bets. The final plea here for more positive support from customers was by this time becoming a familiar refrain, but his cause was all but hopeless. The final two series of newsbooks were published, irregularly and with steadily worsening quality, from February 1641 until they finally ceased in or shortly after December 1642 (265). In retrospect it is astonishing that despite all the turmoil going on around him Butter managed to keep going for as long as he did. In May the London mobs were stirred up by rumours of Army Plots. Then in July Parliament abolished the Star Chamber and with it the last vestiges of official censorship.<sup>23</sup> The plague in England reached its peak in October while in Ireland the Catholics rose up in bloody rebellion; in November Parliament passed the Grand Remonstrance; and at the beginning of January 1642 Charles, having been thwarted in his attempt to arrest the Five Members in the House of Commons left London, not to return again until 1647 as a prisoner to be tried for his life.

Amidst this veritable sea of troubles, on 29 November 1641, in the vicinity of the Old Bailey, the first weekly newsbook of domestic news was set before the reading public by a publisher called John Thomas (Frank 22). In doing so he opened one of the most fascinating chapters in the history of the press. This newsbook, which was titled *The Heads of Severall Proceedings In This Present Parliament* is widely considered to be the first truly English newspaper. But only just. Within a fortnight a second weekly had appeared and by the end of the year there was a third. All were as yet unlicensed but the trickle soon became an irresistible flood. To this flood of domestic news the ever-resourceful Butter seems to have responded in a complex, not to say contradictory way. The heading of the earliest surviving newsbook from his fourteenth series, which is undated but which was probably produced around the middle of January 1642 reads as follows:

A little true forraine newes: *better* than a great deale of domestik spurious false newes, published daily without feare or wit, to the shame of the nation, and beyond the liberty of

*Paris pasquils. Unto which is added a letter written by the Lieutenant of the Tower, to the Parliament, in defence of himselfe, and may give satisfaction to all men.*<sup>24</sup> (Dahl 262)

The structure of this heading is quite extraordinary. First Butter makes a virtue of his lack of news; then he contrasts it favourably with the upstart ‘domestik’ competition (the stock ‘knocking copy’ here for once perhaps imbued with a genuine touch of the veteran publisher’s pride in his work); but he ends with a puff for the very thing he has just complained about.<sup>25</sup> What is even more remarkable, however, is that from 27 December 1641 to 3 January 1642, Butter had actually *joined* John Thomas in a partnership to produce yet another new domestic newsbook, called *Diurnall Occurrences: Or The Heads of severall proceedings in both Houses of Parliament*. And from 3 to 10 January he even tried to produce a domestic newsbook of his own called *The Passages in Parliament*.<sup>26</sup> Clearly, Butter realized that the future of the press lay in domestic news, though in carrying both domestic and foreign news *A little true forraine newes* was closer to modern newspapers than any of the unlicensed newsbooks that were then preoccupied almost exclusively with reporting the goings on in Parliament. And yet he did not readily give up on the foreign news trade. Even as late as June 1642, when it appears that he was suffering harassment from his competitors, he was still valiantly experimenting with new business models. In what may well have been his very last editorial notice he wrote:

The Printer of the Forraine Avisoes giveth notice, That he intendeth to continuue the printing of the Forrein Occurents constantly now every week, or at least every footnight if the Poste keepeth his course. And because the booksellers (to their customers) doe (out of envie or ignorance) as much as they can obscure and vilivie the said Avisoes: Therefore if any Gentlemen desire to have them sent unto them weekly, they may be furnished at S. Austins gate, and at the entrance into the Old Exchange, from the Fountaine, upon easie termes.

(265)

It seems unlikely that many gentlemen were willing to risk taking out one of his new-fangled subscriptions, however easy the terms, particularly for a foreign newsbook, and by the end of the year we hear no more of Butter’s ‘Forraine Avisoes’. Neither does he seem to have had any lasting success in the domestic news market. And so it was that in November 1643 one of the new domestic weeklies could observe that ‘the greasie ghost of Nathaniel Butter ... walks about in print no more.’ Although he lived on for another twenty years it seems that his fortunes never recovered and he died in a poorhouse in 1664.<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, in my opinion the study of media history has been a seriously neglected aspect of media studies. My own experience of teaching about the media to graduate students is that for all of their enthusiasm and knowledge about the latest media technologies, their education has failed to equip many of them with an adequate appreciation of the historical development of the media or of the fundamental issues with which any critical and theoretically-informed study of the media should be concerned. I believe these two problems are linked and may therefore be best addressed together: it is my hope that by encouraging students to reflect on the former they may find their way to a better understanding of the latter. And to this end the history of the news media in Britain during the middle of the seventeenth century offers a particularly rewarding case study because of the extraordinary political events that occurred then and the freedom which, all too briefly, the press enjoyed. Though Butter died, the English newspaper lived on. And during the Civil War and the Commonwealth that followed it, the press played a crucial part in ‘turning the world upside down’, the story of which I shall reserve for my next paper.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Barnett and Gaber, 4-9.
- <sup>2</sup> It is a sad reflection on the disregard of media history that it is not explicitly stipulated as an area of study for any of the current British high-school qualifications in Media Studies and that it is not included as a topic in itself in any of the most widely used Media Studies texts, with O’Sullivan et al’s *Studying the Media* being an honourable exception.
- <sup>3</sup> I have drawn in this paper on the work of two principal authors. My original inspiration came from reading Joseph Frank’s magisterial *The Beginnings of the English Newspaper* (1961), for many years the only thorough study of the topic and still unrivalled for its breadth of scope and wealth of detail. Frank’s work in turn led me to Folke Dahl’s pioneering and exhaustive *A Bibliography of English Corantos and Periodical Newsbooks* (1952) from which many of the quotations used in this paper are drawn. I gratefully acknowledge my debt here to these two writers.
- <sup>4</sup> Reproduced as a facsimile in Frank (5). Although Frank (3) clearly implies that he considers this to have been the first issue of van den Keere’s coranto, there is as far as I know no positive external evidence to corroborate this. On the contrary, the very fact that an expectation – albeit in the event unsatisfied – of news from Italy has been afforded its own heading here, at the very top of the first column, suggests that it was not and that there had been at least one previous issue earlier in the year.
- <sup>5</sup> In this and all other quotations from contemporary documents I have endeavored to reproduce them in a manner which closely reflects their original appearance without making them unduly

difficult to read. Accordingly, I have retained the original punctuation, capitalization, italics, and spelling, with the exception of *vv* for *w* and the long *s*.

- <sup>6</sup> Dahl, 31-41.
- <sup>7</sup> Siebert, 150.
- <sup>8</sup> Quoted in Dahl, 49.
- <sup>9</sup> Siebert, 151.
- <sup>10</sup> See Dahl, 51 for his evidence in support of this identification. Note that Butter's first name was frequently spelt 'Nathaniel'.
- <sup>11</sup> Frank, 7.
- <sup>12</sup> Evidently size still matters, judging by the recent spate of English broadsheet newspapers that have switched to a smaller, tabloid (or in the case of *The Guardian* its famous 'Berliner') format.
- <sup>13</sup> Dahl, 20.
- <sup>14</sup> Dahl, 21.
- <sup>15</sup> Dahl, 57.
- <sup>16</sup> Data derived from Dahl's *Bibliography*.
- <sup>17</sup> See Kress and van Leeuwen, *Reading Images*, 18-21 for an unconventional history of writing and the semiotic landscape.
- <sup>18</sup> Field, 9. That Gainsford had recently died of the plague may not have been known to Holland when he wrote this poem.
- <sup>19</sup> Dahl, 149.
- <sup>20</sup> Dahl, 221.
- <sup>21</sup> Field, 15.
- <sup>22</sup> Frank suggests that this was 'probably after having more successfully practiced a bit of bribery,' though he gives no evidence for this otherwise plausible theory. It may however be connected to the curious fact that their patent included a clause requiring them to pay an annual sum of 10 pounds for 'the Repayre of St. Paules Church, London.' See Frank, 15.
- <sup>23</sup> Parliament regained a temporary grip on the press in March 1642.
- <sup>24</sup> Pasquils were lampoons or spoofs.
- <sup>25</sup> The letter in question, addressed to the Speaker of the House of Commons, was from Sir John Byron, who as Charles' appointee and a known Royalist was in a very difficult position and was desperately seeking permission to relinquish his post.
- <sup>26</sup> See Frank, Appendix B.
- <sup>27</sup> Plomer, H. *A Dictionary of the Booksellers and Printers Who Were at Work in England, Scotland and Ireland from 1641 to 1667*. London: Bibliographical Society. Referred to by Frank, 79.

## References

- Barnett, Steve and Ivor Gaber. *Westminster Tales: The Twenty-First-Century Crisis in Political Journalism*. London: Continuum, 2001.
- Clarke, Bob. *From Grub Street to Fleet Street: An Illustrated History of the English Newspapers to 1899*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.

- Dahl, Folke. *A Bibliography of English Corantos and Periodical Newsbooks 1620 – 1642*. London: Bibliographical Society, 1952.
- Frank, Joseph. *The Beginnings of the English Newspaper 1620 – 1660*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1961.
- Kress, Gunther, and Theo van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- O’Sullivan, Tim, Brian Dutton and Phillip Rayner. *Studying the Media*. 3rd ed. London: Arnold, 2003.
- Raymond, Joad. *The Invention of the Newspaper: English Newsbooks 1641 – 1649*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
- Siebert, Frederick. *Freedom of the Press in England, 1476 – 1776*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1952.