

Reading and Writing: Turning the Interdisciplinary Page in Early America

Joseph M. Adelman

Framingham State University

A paper presented at

“Economic History’s Many Muses”

Fourteenth Annual Conference of the

Program in Early American Economy and Society

October 24-25, 2014

Library Company of Philadelphia
1314 Locust Street, Philadelphia PA

For most historians, the practices of communication that historical actors used are like a good umpiring crew in the World Series; they only get noticed when things go horribly awry. Historians have always mined documents primarily for textual evidence and offered scant space in their narratives for the vessels which carried that text. That can lead in some unexpected directions. Canonical historical research that focuses on print and particular genres frequently has little to say about the print materials as objects. Bernard Bailyn, for example, offers little about pamphlets and why they were the chosen vessel for conveying American political ideology in the 1760s and 1770s aside from a few comments in the introduction to *Ideological Origins*.¹ Even the volume published based on the first conference of the Program in Early American Economy and Society, *The Economy of Early America*, has few direct references to communication and print, most of which appear in an essay by David Waldstreicher on Benjamin Franklin and slavery.² Today we are the leadoff panel, so we are making progress.

Now we are all scholars of print and communication. We voraciously consume the journals, letters, financial records, newspapers, almanacs, books, images and other documents of the early American past in order to better understand it. In the process of reading, we interpret not only the words on the page but also the pages themselves, for they often have much to offer to scholars in their physical design, construction, or layout. Often scholars do this unconsciously—we may recognize a particular ledger as the product of a particular merchant working at a particular time and place because of its format, its handwriting, or any number of other details. And sometimes this work reaches the level of consciousness, which is to say that it manifests in our writing about a topic. In recent years, communication-minded scholars have brought greater attention to the material circumstances of how their sources were produced, circulated, and consumed. For those of us whose primary interest is in print and communication, this is a welcome development, as it accomplishes a primary goal of making the material circumstances of production and circulation salient matters for historical consideration.

Of course even today most historians don't "do" the history of print and communication. Instead, they rely on the insights of historians who work in one of several related subfields in the

¹ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, enlarged ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992).

² Cathy D. Matson, ed., *The Economy of Early America: Historical Perspectives and New Directions* (University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006); David Waldstreicher, "Capitalism, Slavery, and Benjamin Franklin's American Revolution," in *The Economy of Early America*, 183–217; David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America: Benjamin Franklin, Slavery, and the American Revolution* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004).

history of communication. As examples, I offer two recent works that clearly and seamlessly integrated practices of communication into their narratives. In *Ratification*, Pauline Maier takes a fine-tooth comb to the debates over the Constitution in state conventions in 1787 and 1788. In addition to mastering the nuances of bills of rights and constitution-making, Maier possesses a keen eye for how communication influenced the discussions. She notes, for instance, that the division in Congress over the Constitution failed to reach the reading public because the New York newspapers excluded such news from their accounts of Congressional debates and the journals of Congress excised any dissent. Only months later, when a Virginia newspaper published amendments offered by Richard Henry Lee, did the news begin to circulate.³ Jessica Lepler similarly offers a nuanced account of communication and its impact in her study of the transatlantic Panic(s) of 1837.⁴ In fact, I would suggest that her book is as much a history of information and communication as it is of finance and politics because the problem of long-distance communication and time lags were so central to understanding why bankers in New York, New Orleans, and London reacted how they did to the crisis.

In this essay, I will focus attention somewhat more internally on historians of communication and media practices. The fields in which they work go by a dizzying array of overlapping names: communication history, media history, information history, print culture studies, and the history of the book. Over the past fifteen years, scholars from a variety of fields have opened new veins of research in the history of print and communication that have broadened the field and yielded important new insights into how those areas of life functioned within American culture. In particular, scholars from disciplines outside history—most notably literature, library science, and the history of the book—have examined questions about the nature of print in early America and how people communicated with one another in a deeply historical context. The most defining feature of communication research has thus been its interdisciplinarity, as scholars from history and its allied fields have worked to expand what counts as topics of historical interest and to bring new materials to light. At the same time, that very interdisciplinarity has ironically narrowed the scope of work on communication topics, leaving considerable room for additional research.

³ Pauline Maier, *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 58.

⁴ Jessica M. Lepler, *The Many Panics of 1837: People, Politics, and the Creation of a Transatlantic Financial Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Fifteen Years of Print and Communication

Work on print and communication has come from several directions over the past fifteen years. Much of this work has been done, either explicitly or implicitly, from the perspective of the history of the book, a field which the Library Company in particular has championed and nurtured along with its companion institution in Worcester, the American Antiquarian Society. As a self-consciously interdisciplinary field, the history of the book brings together historians, literary scholars, sociologists, bibliographers, librarians, material culture scholars, and others to examine the material factors involved in the production, circulation, and consumption of books and other printed materials. As a methodology pioneered for historians by scholars such as Robert Darnton, the history of the book encourages researchers to consider their sources not just as texts but as objects.⁵ Now is an especially good time to review the state of the field of the history of the book. Over the first decade of the twenty-first century the American Antiquarian Society sponsored the publication of a five-volume series entitled, *A History of the Book in America*. Nearly five years have now passed since the publication of the final volume (Volume 2 in the series), allowing for some measure of historiographic perspective on the entire project.

These volumes laid down a gauntlet for understanding print culture in early America. Together, they offer a relatively comprehensive portrait of both the history of print and communication in America from 1639 to 1840 as well as the field as a scholarly enterprise. The first volume, *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, appeared in 2000 and has become an indispensable resource for scholars of early America, even though the editors self-consciously resisted the suggestion that the book be considered encyclopedic.⁶ Its thirteen chapters cover a broad range of the world of print for the era before 1763, and situate early American print culture within a British Atlantic context. Throughout, the authors and editors are attentive to the economics of the printing trade both internally and as they relate to broader trends of Atlantic commerce.⁷ And, as James Green notes, “by the 1720s, printing was coming to be understood as an essential element in a liberal commercial society.”⁸ Books may not have been the most

⁵ Robert Darnton, “What Is the History of Books?,” *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (July 1, 1982): 65–83.

⁶ Hugh Amory and David D. Hall, eds., *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, vol. 1, *A History of the Book in America* (Chapel Hill: American Antiquarian Society, University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 12.

⁷ These issues are addressed directly in Chapter 5 of *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*.

⁸ James N. Green, “English Books and Printing in the Age of Franklin,” in *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, 248.

lucrative commercial products that crossed the Atlantic, but they were nonetheless central to the functioning of society.

The second volume in the series, *An Extensive Republic*, picks up the story after the Revolution and carries it forward to 1840, just at a moment when technological innovations began to dramatically change the nature of printing and communication.⁹ Covering a far shorter time frame than the first volume, *An Extensive Republic* is nonetheless much more sprawling, which actually reflects the print and book cultures of its time period relatively well. Economically, the printing trade was, as Robert Gross described it, “multifarious,” growing in a range of ways and directions simultaneously—and only some of those paths sought a profit (leaving aside the question of whether they ever encountered one).¹⁰ Ironically, where the first volume focused heavily on the book as a unit of measure for an era when book production was low, *An Extensive Republic* dedicates significant attention to many of the other forms of print, not least newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals, when book publishing finally began to take hold in the United States—though it was not yet, if it ever would be, dominant in printing and publishing.

The trend towards book history has been particularly strong in early American studies, where literary scholars and historians often wrestle with questions of authorship, provenance, and publication regardless of how central book history is to their interests. A good example is the work of Steven Carl Smith, who in several essays explores the book publishing trade of New York City in the early republic. Marrying the approach of book history with a staggering database on the book trades, Smith connects the literary culture of early national New York to commercial and political networks (some real and others, tragically, only purported) around the United States.¹¹ Several scholars have also taken on projects about networks in the early republic, including Catherine O’Donnell, Tim Cassedy, Joseph Rezek, and others.¹² Some

⁹ Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley, eds., *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*, vol. 2, *A History of the Book in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

¹⁰ Robert A. Gross, “Introduction: An Extensive Republic,” in *An Extensive Republic*, 4–5.

¹¹ Steven Carl Smith, “‘Elements of Useful Knowledge’: New York and the National Book Trade in the Early Republic,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 106, no. 4 (2012): 487–538; Steven Carl Smith, “‘A Rash, Thoughtless, and Imprudent Young Man’: John Ward Fenno and the Federalist Literary Network,” *Literature in the Early American Republic: Annual Studies on Cooper and His Contemporaries* 6 (2014): 1–35.

¹² Catherine O’Donnell Kaplan, *Men of Letters in the Early Republic: Cultivating Forums of Citizenship* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, by the University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Tim Cassedy, “‘A Dictionary Which We Do Not Want’:

cultural historians have focused not on print but on manuscript forms of writing, in particular correspondence, including Konstantin Dierks, who links the cultural form of letter-writing to class consciousness in eighteenth-century America.¹³

Political historians have also emphasized repeatedly the importance of communication in early America and in particular the personnel of the printing trades.¹⁴ Jeff Pasley, for instance, argued that newspaper editors formed the basis of a network that functioned as a sort of quasi-party apparatus for the nascent Republican party in the 1790s and 1800s. T.H. Breen credited American print culture for creating the conditions for the Revolution by encouraging American colonists to think of themselves as common consumers. More recently, Seth Cotlar has demonstrated the trans-Atlantic connections forged around cosmopolitanism in the 1790s that shaped not only political ideology but also the process of American politics. Other political historians have argued that we need to more closely examine the infrastructure of communication. Most forcefully, Paul Starr argues in his *The Creation of the Media* that the American system of communication is shaped by a series of “constitutive choices”—to construct a postal system based on newspaper circulation, to keep the telegraph system private, and so on—that deeply shaped the possibilities for later policy-making.¹⁵ In that argument he relies, of course, on the work of Richard John, who for almost twenty years has issued calls to pay greater attention to the Post Office and other circuits of communication as facilitators of political communication.¹⁶ In another vein, political scientist Alan Houston has re-interpreted the oeuvre

Defining America against Noah Webster, 1783–1810,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 71, no. 2 (April 2014): 229–54, doi:10.5309/willmaryquar.71.2.0229; Joseph Rezek, “Furious Booksellers: The ‘American Copy’ of the Waverley Novels and the Language of the Book Trade,” *Early American Studies* 11, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 557–82; Matt Cohen, *The Networked Wilderness: Communicating in Early New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

¹³ Konstantin Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

¹⁴ Jeffrey L. Pasley, “*The Tyranny of Printers*”: *Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic*, Jeffersonian America (Charlottesville (Va.): University Press of Virginia, 2001); T. H Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Seth Cotlar, *Tom Paine’s America: The Rise and Fall of Transatlantic Radicalism in the Early Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); Todd Estes, *The Jay Treaty Debate, Public Opinion, and the Evolution of Early American Political Culture*, Political Development of the American Nation (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

¹⁶ Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995); Richard R. John, “Expanding the Realm of Communications,” in *An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*, ed. Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelley, vol. 2, *A History of the Book in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 211–20;

of Benjamin Franklin, arguing that his political philosophy, much like his approach to printing, derived from his drive for “improvement.” Houston argues that for Franklin, improvement was inexorably linked to the endeavor for commercial success.¹⁷

Not all scholars of early American print and print networks are optimists, however. Trish Loughran stands out in this regard as the paradigmatic cynic of national print culture. Rather than a linked set of networks and circuits connecting the nation, Loughran argues that the print culture of the United States in its first hundred years was unremittingly fragmented.¹⁸ Moving from the publication history of Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, she posits instead that a national print culture (as much as she is willing to grant) only emerged in the 1850s during the sectional crisis, a decade not otherwise known for its nationalist fervor. I disagree with her thesis, essentially because she frames the question of whether American print culture was nationalized in such a way that makes it impossible to say “yes.” But her work on the ins and outs of the printing and book trades, and how local political and commercial considerations could influence the publication history of a canonized political treatise such as *Common Sense*.¹⁹

Unfortunately, these studies and the literary/cultural studies above often co-exist rather than engaging with one another (about which more later). Nonetheless, they share several common threads. First, they emphasize the importance of interpersonal networks for facilitating communication, a development that mirrors trends in other historical fields.²⁰ Second, they all take seriously questions not only about the inner workings of the printing trade but also how the trade and its practices related to politics and culture. Third, many of these studies focus on the early American republic, a period which is drawing scholars ever nearer through its centripetal pull. Finally, for all the benefits of these studies, they frequently set aside or elide questions of economics in favor of exploring politics, culture, and identity.

Richard R John, *Network Nation: Inventing American Telecommunications* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010); Richard R John, *The American Postal Network, 1792-1914* (London; Brookfield, Vt.: Pickering & Chatto, 2012).

¹⁷ Alan Houston, *Benjamin Franklin and the Politics of Improvement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

¹⁸ Trish Loughran, *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Trish Loughran, “Disseminating *Common Sense*: Thomas Paine and the Problem of the Early National Bestseller,” *American Literature* 78, no. 1 (2006): 1–28.

¹⁹ Loughran, *The Republic in Print*, chap. 1.

²⁰ Nathan Perl-Rosenthal, “Comment: Generational Turns,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 3 (June 2012): 804–13.

For the most part, these projects still tell the story of largely traditional political actors—mostly white, mostly male—but scholars have also used the history of the book as a methodology to bring new actors into the historical consciousness. Karen Weyler examines this question explicitly in her 2013 book *Empowering Words*, in which she narrates the stories of those marginalized in society and how they used publication, both print and scribal, to insert their voices into public conversations.²¹ Though most of the book is about the cultural process of authorship, Weyler turns to explicitly economic issues in a chapter on Clementina Rind, the widow of Williamsburg printer William Rind. She succeeded to his office on his death in 1773 and published the *Virginia Gazette* until her own death just thirteen months later.²² During her brief tenure, she engaged actively as a master printer in the numerous political and commercial debates of the period, and Weyler specifically credits her “business acumen” as part of her success.²³

At the same time, as the motivating energy that drove *An Extensive Republic* to a broad array of print genres, the phrase “history of the book” is a bit of a misnomer when it comes to early American studies. Colonists bought, sold, and read books, to be sure, but relatively few were printed in the colonies.²⁴ In terms of the print culture of British North America, they were but a small piece of the puzzle. Most of what was printed in early America, from 1640 when Stephen Daye produced the Bay Psalm Book to the Jacksonian era of the 1830s, was not books. In fact, only after 1790 did book publication of any scale begin in the United States, particularly through its well-networked and first successful publishers, Isaiah Thomas in Worcester and Mathew Carey in Philadelphia.²⁵ The interdisciplinarity of the field has brought tremendous benefit to the history of early America in print, but it has also pushed scholarship in the past

²¹ Karen A. Weyler, *Empowering Words: Outsiders and Authorship in Early America* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2013).

²² As of 1773, Williamsburg was host to two newspapers, both of which carried the title *The Virginia Gazette* with no additional subtitle. One was published by the Rinds and the other by Alexander Purdie and John Dixon. In 1775 Purdie broke from the partnership and started his own newspaper, the third in Williamsburg, which he creatively titled *The Virginia Gazette*. For more, see the website of the Rockefeller Library at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation on the *Gazettes*, <http://research.history.org/DigitalLibrary/BrowseVG.cfm>.

²³ Weyler, *Empowering Words*, 202.

²⁴ Hugh Amory, “A Note on Statistics,” in *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, 504–18. As Jim Green has noted, whether a book was printed in America was a distinct question from whether a book was authored by an American. See James N. Green, “The Rise of Book Publishing,” in *An Extensive Republic*, 79.

²⁵ Rosalind Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital: Philadelphia Book Publishers in the New Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996); Green, “The Rise of Book Publishing.”

decade in the direction of cultural history that emphasizes the book, its author, and its publisher as privileged actors in the field of print.

An Evidentiary Challenge

In order to enhance and encourage the study of the economics of print and communication, it would be enormously helpful to examine the financial records that explain how the trade worked and connected to other parts of society. Unfortunately, that poses a problem, as the records for printers and publishers before 1783 have not been well preserved. The situation for the early United States is not nearly so dire. We know a fair amount, and have data to do far more, with early Republic publishing superstars Isaiah Thomas and Mathew Carey (not to mention many others). The ledgers and correspondence from Carey's career alone could sustain decades of research.²⁶ For many of the printers active prior to and during the Revolutionary War, however, almost nothing survives in modern archives. This is not to say that there are no records at all; account books, estate inventories, and other financial records survive for some number of printers. Several of these documents have been published in journals, making them accessible to a broad audience.²⁷ But they were published largely because they are relatively rare.

What we do have for the colonial period are records related to the life and career of a certain Philadelphia printer who ended his association with the printing trade to pursue other interests. Franklin, of course, is the outlier among outliers for the colonial period, and his materials are scattered across several Philadelphia institutions (most of which he played a role in founding) and other major archives and research centers around the United States.²⁸ Yet he also poses a problem not only for his contemporaries but also for historians. The long shadow of his epic career and important autobiography can obscure—and in fact have—that the printing trade

²⁶ For examples of research on Carey, see the essays in the special issue of *Early American Studies* on “The Worlds of Mathew Carey,” vol. 11, no. 3 (Fall 2013). The American Antiquarian Society holds the Papers of Isaiah Thomas and the business records of Mathew Carey, and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Library Company of Philadelphia hold most of Carey's correspondence, library, and other papers.

²⁷ See for example: “Inventory of the Estate of William Rind,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 2nd ser., 17 (1937): 53–55; Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Journals of Hugh Gaine: Printer* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co, 1902); Isaiah Thomas, *Three Autobiographical Fragments by Isaiah Thomas; Now First Published upon the 150th Anniversary of the Founding of the American Antiquarian Society, October 24, 1812* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1962).

²⁸ Then there is also *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree, 41 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959-).

in the eighteenth century amounted to far more than Franklin and his cohort. As late as the early 1770s, Franklin still sought an American rapprochement with Britain, in no small measure because he sought imperial advancement for himself.²⁹ His main partners and correspondents in North America, James Parker in New York and David Hall in Philadelphia, were aging and fearful of the new political movement sweeping the colonies.³⁰ They assumed they stood more to lose than gain by standing up against the British ministry's various taxation schemes, and they wrote as much to Franklin, then in London as the agent for Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and several other colonies. Because their correspondence was so readily available and involved relatively prominent men in the trade, scholars have taken their accounts of being forced into political activity against their judgment as representative of the printing trade, when in fact they were some of the most cautious printers in the entire colonies.³¹

Franklin's shadow extends beyond his own papers. His business partner, David Hall, kept the records of the business after Franklin retired, so we have some of his accounts and much of his correspondence.³² And there is the Bradford family, a minor dynasty in colonial printing, whose records in Philadelphia also survive, probably in no small measure because William Bradford, a Son of Liberty in the 1760s, served as Chairman of the Navy Board during the Revolution, and his son William, a Princeton graduate, served as United States Attorney General in the Washington Administration.³³ These are enormously useful collections, to be sure, and much is to be gained from examining them for the economic history of printing. But there were several hundred men and women active as printers before the Revolution. That I can name the major collections and count them essentially on one hand speaks to the problem.

Aside from Franklin, few account books survive from the colonial period, and correspondence—again, Franklin and his network notwithstanding—is confined to a handful of letters for even the most economically successful and/or important printers of the period. There is little record of the correspondence or business, for example, of the office of Edes and Gill in

²⁹ Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).

³⁰ For contrasting views of Franklin's network, see Green, "English Books and Printing in the Age of Franklin"; Ralph Frasca, *Benjamin Franklin's Printing Network: Disseminating Virtue in Early America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006).

³¹ Stephen Botein, "'Meer Mechanics' and an Open Press: The Business and Political Strategies of Colonial American Printers," *Perspectives in American History* 9 (1975): 127–225; Stephen Botein, "Printers and the American Revolution," in *The Press and the American Revolution*, ed. Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1980), 11–57.

³² David Hall Papers, American Philosophical Society, Mss. B.H142.1-3.

³³ Bradford Family Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Collection 1676.

Boston, James Rivington, John Holt in New York, Peter Timothy in Charleston—and these were just a few of those active before the Revolution. Why are there so few surviving records? As far as I can tell, the problem has four likely explanations:

(1) Prior to the Revolution, there were not actually all that many printers or printing offices. Few towns hosted a printer at all in the seventeenth century, and the trade grew very slowly until the beginning of the Revolutionary War. By 1763, there were about 59 printers active in a given year, and most of the growth in the profession had come in the previous fifty years. The number of printers who had ever been active from the time that the first North American office opened in 1639 likely is less than 100, which makes for a relatively small sample size.

(2) Printers seem not to have kept particularly reliable accounts, certainly as compared to other commercial men higher on the socioeconomic scale such as merchants. They obviously had records, but had less of a sense of themselves as long-term economic players and so likely were less assiduous in keeping detailed records that they planned to save. Of the records that do survive, several are receipt books or other forms of scrap that printers used to take quick notes on.³⁴ Double-entry ledgers, by contrast, are few and far between.

(3) As for printers' correspondence, they were in the business of using up their paper. Much of the manuscript writing that passed through their hands did so in order to enter print publication. If one is lucky enough to encounter an original newspaper rather than using microfilm or the America's Historical Newspapers database, he or she might see markings on the newspaper that its owner made. In the collections of the American Antiquarian Society, for example, a significant number of the copies of newspapers it owns for the 1770s to the early 1800s were once owned by Isaiah Thomas and used by him as he prepared his weekly *Massachusetts Spy*. Because printers corresponded with many of the leading lights in their towns, there is likely additional correspondence in the papers of prominent merchants and political leaders, but that research involves a quest for needles in haystacks.

(4) Of the printers whose offices were active during the imperial crisis and into 1775, many had to leave their offices in a hurry sometime during the war – approximately fifty-one

³⁴ For one example, see Hugh Gainé, *Original Receipt Manuscript Book, 1767-1799*, Archives and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library.

printers representing thirty-nine printing offices, or nearly half of the printers active in 1775.³⁵ The most important things to take were the press and sets of types, which were by far the most valuable property in a printer's possession. They might take other supplies if they had time, but gathering the entire records was likely not a high priority. In other words, I think they either left behind or destroyed their business records. This was true not only for minor characters, but also those such as Isaiah Thomas who were convinced at a very young age that they were headed for greatness. Very little of Thomas's records survive from his service in Boston as a printer in the early 1770s, but once he moved to Worcester, and especially after 1780, the evidentiary record increases dramatically.

All of that is to say that we lack considerable sources of data on which an economic history would ordinarily be based. We can, of course, look at indirect sources, such as government contracts, which were the lifeblood of many printers' businesses, the papers of the people for whom they printed materials, and of course their product, which survives in abundance. But we need to be mindful of the challenges that absence poses.

Areas of Opportunity

Notwithstanding the caveat about source problems, there are several areas in which book history and the broader history of print and communication can head in a more economic direction while retaining the advances made in the past fifteen years. First, one of the best trends in recent years has been how historians and literary scholars have connected an understanding of the inner workings of the printing trade with broader developments in political, religious, social, and cultural life. Adding or enhancing a discussion of economics and how communication functioned as a commercial endeavor would enrich that conversation.

Second, it seems odd to be writing this, but historians of print and communication (and especially history of the book) could bring renewed attention to the American Revolution. It may be difficult to notice it at first, but the *History of the Book in America* series actually contains

³⁵ This figure is based on a database of master printers that I compiled as part of my research using the Printers File at the American Antiquarian Society as a building block. For additional analysis, see *Revolutionary Networks: The Business of Printing and the Production of American Politics, 1763-1789* (manuscript in preparation), chapter 5.

very little scholarship on the Revolution or the surrounding era.³⁶ That means that the work on “the history of the book” during the American Revolution is mostly older work that doesn't describe itself as such -- old classics such as *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (the key lies in pamphlets), and the work of Stephen Botein, whose two articles on printers in colonial and revolutionary America, published in the 1970s and 1980s, are still required reading and citations for work on this period.³⁷ This is the area in which I am most trying to make a contribution, but I have no illusions that I would be the final word on the matter.

As an example, one source base that has not been deeply examined is the records of the Loyalist Claims Commission, organized in Britain after the end of the Revolution to adjudicate claims by American Loyalists who had lost property or income because of the war.³⁸ Some twenty former printers filed claims with the Commission, providing evidence along the way of the financial activities of their businesses as well as the political hardships they suffered along the way. For instance, Margaret Draper, the widow of Richard Draper who took over his printing office when he died in 1774 and published the *Boston News-Letter*, evacuated Boston when the British left the town in March 1776.³⁹ She filed a claim with the Commission for over £2,000 in damages and losses because of the war, for which she received £940.⁴⁰ The data require a careful eye, as the Commission itself believed many of the claimants had exaggerated their financial injuries, but the claims provide a wealth of data on at least one group of printers.

Further research on topics related to the relationship between Britain and North America would strengthen the trend in history at large to head out into the ocean waters. The publication of *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* in 2000 occurred just when Atlantic history was beginning its ascendance, and historians of print and communication have traveled the same road as their colleagues (or I suppose in this case, the same ocean currents). Richard Sher, for

³⁶ Richard D. Brown, “The Shifting Freedoms of the Press in the Eighteenth Century,” in *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World*, 366–76; Richard D. Brown, “The Revolution’s Legacy for the History of the Book,” in *An Extensive Republic*, 58–74.

³⁷ Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*; Botein, “‘Meer Mechanics’ and an Open Press: The Business and Political Strategies of Colonial American Printers”; Botein, “Printers and the American Revolution.”

³⁸ On the Loyalist Claims Commission, see Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty’s Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011).

³⁹ Leona M. Hudak, *Early American Women Printers and Publishers, 1639-1820* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1978), 397–423; Sidney E. Berger, “Innovation and Diversity Among the Green Family of Printers,” *Printing History* 12, no. 1 (1990): 2–20.

⁴⁰ Reports and Statements, American Loyalist Claims, Series I, AO 12/109/124-125, Public Record Office, UK National Archives, viewed at the David Library of the American Revolution.

example, sought to unify the study of “the realm of the mind” and “the realm of the purse” in his examination of the Scottish Enlightenment and the printing trade.⁴¹ Sher devoted particular attention to the Scottish and Irish immigrants who settled in Philadelphia, including Robert Bell (the first publisher of *Common Sense*), Robert Aitken, and Mathew Carey.⁴² In America, the Scottish Enlightenment was not just a product of the thought of Hume, Smith, Hutcheson, and others, but also the product of a culture of reprinting that flourished in part by taking advantage of loopholes in British copyright law that left open works published in Ireland. More recently, Uriel Heyd interpreted London and American newspapers with a comparative approach, arguing that the newspaper was “an active agent” shaping many facets of public life.⁴³

Projects of ordinary size are always helpful, but perhaps the greatest need in this area is a new synthesis of Atlantic communication in the eighteenth century. The classic work on the period, Ian K. Steele’s *English Atlantic*, is now out of print and has several drawbacks.⁴⁴ First, we can now say a great deal comparatively about communication structures and practices in various imperial contexts, and almost as importantly do so synthetically. Second, Steele self-consciously ended his study in 1740 so that he would not have to address communications issues related to the Age of Revolutions. The second half of the eighteenth century was certainly not a simple period in the history of communication, but we now have not only new research but also new tools (some of which Caitlin Rosenthal discusses in her paper) to address questions of communication. Even so, such an undertaking would be massive and the suggestion may prove little more than a pipe dream.

Numerous topics that address economic issues more directly also One of the most promising avenues of scholarship to understand how economics shaped print and communication is through advertising. This past summer, the journal *American Periodicals* published a special issue focusing on advertising in Early America, based on papers presented at two-part conference convened by the American Antiquarian Society and the Library Company. As Carl Keyes notes in his introduction to the issue, advertising is a topic often considered “modern,” in which anything that happened before the 1920s is considered primordial and beneath critical

⁴¹ Richard B. Sher, *The Enlightenment & the Book: Scottish Authors and Their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland, & America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 11.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 503–595.

⁴³ Uriel Heyd, *Reading Newspapers: Press and Public in Eighteenth-Century Britain and America*, SVEC 2012:3 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2012), 27.

⁴⁴ Ian K. Steele, *The English Atlantic, 1675-1740: An Exploration of Communication and Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

examination.⁴⁵ Using the Atlantic context, Emma Hart traces trans-Atlantic advertising in provincial newspapers to show the distinctive features of colonial American advertising, which she links to America's peripheral status within Atlantic trading networks and an underdeveloped marketplace.⁴⁶ Seth Perry turns to the problem of how early American publishers advertised an item that almost every American owned: the Bible.⁴⁷ Keyes himself offers an essay that examines the uses of patriotism in a "marketing campaign" to sell prints of Thomas Jefferson.⁴⁸ These essays demonstrate the potential for an economic history of print and communication that links the internal operations of the printing trade to the wider world.

Advertising also opens a window for scholars of print and communication into the funding mechanisms that kept printing offices afloat. Much of the work printers did was "job printing," or work for a fee, to print copies of a sermon, blank forms, or other documents. Most lucrative for printers were government printing contracts, which guaranteed funding to produce the printed journals of colonial assemblies, the governors, and other government entities. But much of the day-to-day work was done in producing their newspapers, which until the end of the colonial period appeared once a week almost exclusively. After the Revolution there was a divergence, in which newspapers in major cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia began to appear daily, but in rural areas the older colonial model held where a newspaper would only appear once a week. To publish these newspapers, printers relied on two sources of funding. First, they charged readers for subscriptions, the cost of which varied depending on the printer, the quality of the newspaper, the frequency of publication, and time. What did not vary, however, was that subscribers were terrible at keeping their accounts current—if readers bothered to subscribe at all.⁴⁹ Because these accounts were so hard to keep, especially for subscribers living at a distance from the place of publication, printers expended great amounts of

⁴⁵ Carl Robert Keyes, "Introduction: Advertising in American Periodicals before Madison Avenue," *American Periodicals* 24, no. 2 (2014): 106.

⁴⁶ Emma Hart, "A British Atlantic World of Advertising? Colonial American 'For Sale' Notices in Comparative Context," *American Periodicals* 24, no. 2 (2014): 112–114.

⁴⁷ Seth Perry, "'What the Public Expect': Consumer Authority and the Marketing of Bibles, 1770-1850," *American Periodicals* 24, no. 2 (2014): 128–44.

⁴⁸ Carl Robert Keyes, "History Prints, Newspaper Advertisements, and Cultivating Citizen Consumers: Patriotism and Partisanship in Marketing Campaigns in the Era of the Revolution," *American Periodicals* 24, no. 2 (2014): 145–85.

⁴⁹ Charles G. Steffen, "Newspapers for Free: The Economies of Newspaper Circulation in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 23, no. 3 (October 2003): 381–419.

energy pleading with, cajoling, haranguing, or otherwise threatening their subscribers in print to pay up already.

The second source of income for a newspaper was potentially steadier in the form of advertising. As content, advertising typically took up anywhere from one third to one half of a single issue's column inches, making it a significant source of both content and cash flow. Yet we could stand to know a great deal more about how advertisers interacted with printers and publishers. For example, how did politics affect the advertising choices of merchants and shopkeepers? This question becomes particularly interesting and fraught during the imperial crisis, through the American Revolution, and into the early Republic as newspapers became more self-consciously political.

More broadly, we could use to know more about how printing operations gained support from benefactors, especially those who stayed in the background. We know a great deal about government support for example, so in this case I mean financing from private sources. In a few famous cases, we have good evidence on the benefactors. Most famously because of the trial, for instance, John Peter Zenger's office in New York in the 1730s was supported by prominent members of the Morrisite faction opposed to the policies of Governor William Cosby. John Hancock provided funding to Isaiah Thomas in the 1770s to keep his press afloat. Mathew Carey owed his start to a chance encounter with the Marquis de Lafayette arranged by a fellow trans-Atlantic passenger as Carey fled Ireland in 1784 and headed to Philadelphia.⁵⁰ Many of the printers in the early United States who set up shop in rural areas also relied on support from local benefactors, in some cases to counter the fact that the market in a new town might not yet be able to support a printing office.⁵¹

* * * *

The attention to the materiality of sources and the transmission networks that facilitated communication is welcome, to be sure. It even prompted Seth Perry to ask a few months ago, "Are we all book historians now?"⁵² On one level that may be so, for scholars do note more frequently than they once did the material factors and processes of production and especially

⁵⁰ Alexander, *A Brief Barrative of the Case and Trial of John Peter Zenger, Printer of the New York Weekly Journal*; Isaiah Thomas to [Zechariah Fowle], March 20, 1772, Isaiah Thomas Papers, AAS; Mathew Carey, *Mathew Carey Autobiography* ([Brooklyn]: [E.L. Schwaab], 1942), 10–11.

⁵¹ Jack Larkin, "Printing Is Something Every Village Has in It": Rural Printing and Publishing," in *An Extensive Republic*, 145–60.

⁵² Seth Perry, "Are We All Book Historians Now?," *The Junto*, February 6, 2014, <http://earlyamericanists.com/2014/02/06/are-we-all-book-historians-now/>.

circulation that shaped their sources. What I would propose is that we need to take that engagement another step forward from each side, that is, from the history of print and communication on the one hand and the rest of historical scholarship on the other. There is much work to be done, and much of it will be economic and commercial in nature, on how the worlds of print and communication both shaped and were shaped by political, religious, social, culture, gender, racial, and other forces.

I would be remiss if I concluded without invoking the great bogeyman of print and communication in the early modern period, the specter that haunts every scholar who ventures into reading eighteenth-century newspapers without sufficient warning. I mean, of course, the German social theorist Jürgen Habermas. In his account of the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth century, Habermas argued that the space, though predicated on the existence of economic relations that led to a self-aware bourgeoisie, specifically excluded economic relations from consideration within. That is, economics created the public sphere but remained outside of it in the private sphere.⁵³ Since his argument was translated into English in 1989, scholars by the dozens have engaged with his theory, refined it, or rejected it wholesale for its many historical transgressions. As a framework for asking questions about how communication was organized in early America, however, the theory of the public sphere continues to have power because what it lacks in explanatory force it makes up for in provoking interesting questions. Yet historians have for the most part overlooked or elided the conundrum that lies at the heart of the Habermasian model of the public sphere: does economics really sit on the outside looking in? Far from it, I would suggest. Rather than constituting the public sphere but never entering it, economic and commercial concerns suffused the public sphere throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, at least in the United States. It may not be necessary to move questions about the history of print and communication to the epicenter of current historiographic consciousness—though I am fully prepared to debate whether printers were capitalist—but rather to examine the many ways in which economics influenced and shaped communication in all of its manifestations at various moments in the past.

⁵³ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas J. Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989).