

Center *for the Study of the* American Constitution

NO. 1: NEWSPAPERS, PSEUDONYMS AND THE DEBATE OVER THE CONSTITUTION

The Founders had a deep appreciation for newspapers. Newspapers had served the revolutionaries well in their struggle for independence and were equally important in the debate over ratifying the proposed new form of government. To a great extent, the public debate over the Constitution was conducted in America's newspapers. At any particular time from 1787 through 1790, approximately ninety-five newspapers were published. Most were weeklies, a half dozen were dailies (excluding Sunday publication), and a few were bi-weeklies and tri-weeklies. Seventy newspapers were printed in the North and twenty-five in the South. Half of the Northern newspapers appeared in New England and half in the Middle States. Newspapers, for the most part, were established in larger cities and towns. Thirteen of Pennsylvania's seventeen newspapers were located in Philadelphia; nine of New York's fourteen newspapers were in New York City, while seven of Massachusetts' fifteen newspapers were in Boston. All four of South Carolina's newspapers were printed in Charleston, while eight of Connecticut's ten newspapers and seven of Virginia's fifteen newspapers were dispersed in different towns. Most newspapers had a local, regional, or state circulation. About ten newspapers had a national perspective. German-language newspapers were printed in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. Press runs usually vacillated between 400 and 600 copies, but some ran as high as 2,000 copies.

Newspapers almost always consisted of one sheet of paper folded in half forming four pages. Two standard sizes of paper were used. Typically the printer set three or four columns on a page. Advertisements usually filled either the first or the last page. Some newspapers had a commercial perspective with a high percentage of commercial/shipping news, price courants, and advertisements. "American Intelligence" and "European Intelligence" usually filled the second and third pages with political essays, legal announcements, and news of events from other states. About half of the newspapers had a poetry column that usually contained new poems from subscribers. Subscribers would sometimes bind six months of issues together for easy storage.

Finances were often difficult for printers. Annual subscriptions for weekly newspapers cost between eight and twenty-four shillings in local money (not including postage) and could sometimes be payable in commodities. Dailies sold for three times that amount. Printers often had difficulty collecting their annual fees. Payments for advertisements could determine whether a newspaper would succeed. Some printers had contracts with the state legislatures to print session laws and other official public acts and information. Some printers sold books, stationery, blank journals, legal and commercial forms, ink, pens, and other supplies to subsidize their newspapers. Some printers also printed broadsides (usually a single sheet printed on one side) and pamphlets, which usually had a broader circulation than newspapers, as well as almanacs and magazines.

The role of the vast majority of newspaper printers was simply that of copyists. Only a few like Eleazer Oswald and Francis Bailey in Philadelphia, Thomas Greenleaf in New York City, and Benjamin Russell in Boston were politically active. Occasionally a printer was the town postmaster. Some newspapers became the official mouthpiece of a political faction. In Philadelphia one faction pejoratively referred to Francis Bailey's *Freeman's Journal* as "Bailey's chamber pot." Printers were often charged with being biased, forcing them to profess their neutrality repeatedly. Newspaper mastheads often contained quotations honoring freedom of the press—"Open to All Parties; Controlled by None" or "The Press is

the Cradle of Science, the Nurse of Genius, and the Shield of Liberty.”

Occasionally women printed newspapers. Mary Holt assisted in printing the *New York Journal* both before and after her husband’s death. Elizabeth Holt Oswald assisted her husband Eleazer Oswald and actually printed the Philadelphia *Independent Gazetteer* when her husband left Philadelphia. She also acted as printer in his stead when he was serving a month-long prison term for libel. Mary Katherine Goddard, postmaster of Baltimore, assisted her brother William in printing the *Maryland Journal*, while Ann Timothy printed the *Gazette of the State of South Carolina* for ten years after her husband’s death.

Virtually all of the country’s newspapers supported the call of the Constitutional Convention. Some advocated that Americans should accept whatever the Convention proposed. Secretary at War Henry Knox, stationed in New York City, wrote the Marquis de Lafayette in France that newspapers had prepared “the minds of the people at large . . . for a change without any particular specification.” The printers of the Lansingburgh (Troy, N.Y.) *Northern Centinel* admitted in their newspaper that they “conceived it a duty incumbent on them to prepare the minds of their readers” for the reception of the new Constitution.

Once the debate over the Constitution commenced, only about a half dozen newspapers throughout the country maintained a blatantly Antifederal posture. Another half dozen remained neutral, while more than eighty newspapers were ardently Federalist, printing a large percentage of items in favor of the Constitution. By 1787 American newspapers had created a primitive news service system that was assisted by the Confederation post office’s policy of free postage for printers when they exchanged their newspapers with each other and regularly reprinted essays, news items, and fillers. Some popular items were reprinted thirty, forty, or even fifty times. In such cases, newspapers occasionally cited their source, but more commonly only inserted a dateline (town and date of the original newspaper) for readers’ reference. Political partisans knew how the newspaper exchange system worked, and they used it to their advantage. For example, Tench Coxe, a Philadelphia merchant and one of the most prolific Federalist writers in America, had his essays printed in Philadelphia. He then sent several copies to James Madison, then serving as a Virginia delegate to Congress in New York City, asking him to forward the articles to Virginia for republication and to give a copy to Alexander Hamilton who could have the essays reprinted in New York if appropriate. Hamilton himself sent several numbers of *The Federalist* to Benjamin Rush in Philadelphia asking that they be published in that city’s newspapers. “Perhaps,” Hamilton wrote, “even if they are not wanted with you, it might be well to give them a passage through your papers to your more Southern neighbors.” Thus, even though modern news services did not exist, American politicians and printers knew how best to disseminate information throughout the country.

A kink in the system occurred in January 1788 at the height of the newspaper debate over the Constitution when the Confederation post office decided that free postage would no longer be provided to newspaper printers exchanging their papers. The post office also stopped contracting with stage coach operators for the delivery of the mail and returned to the far cheaper use of individual post riders. The consequent disruption in the delivery of newspapers and mail evoked an outcry from Antifederalists who charged Federalists with a conspiracy to stifle the circulation of news at this critical time. One Antifederalist, “Manco,” in the Baltimore *Maryland Gazette*, 18 March 1788, wrote that “It is the established creed of America, that the Liberty of the Press is the *Palladium* of all the *civil, political* and *religious* rights of AMERICANS. The News-Papers are the *best* vehicles of intelligence and information, respecting public affairs, to the people at large; and to stop their free circulation, is an act of injury and insult to the citizens of these United States. At no time can it be more necessary to keep open the channels of communication than at the present moment. . . . If the people submit to this conduct, nothing can rouse them from their lethargy, and their next sleep will be the sleep of Death—THE LOSS OF THEIR LIBERTIES.”

Newspapers were almost always filled with articles on the Constitution. Conforming to the publishing etiquette of the time, these essays, whether single pieces or serialized, were signed with a pseudonym. Pseudonyms were meant to focus attention on the issues being discussed while avoiding disputes over the authors’ personalities. Pseudonyms also provided a degree of anonymity for authors if so desired, especially when libel suits, caning, and challenges to duels might face a writer. Sometimes, however, a particular pseudonym became associated with an individual which, in fact, some authors desired. For instance, because Thomas Paine wanted his identity known, he always signed his literary

works as “Common Sense.” Other authors, like Alexander Contee Hanson, an Annapolis lawyer and prolific political writer, found that some anonymous newspaper essays were attributed to him which “dishonored my character.” Consequently, Hanson let it be publicly known that he would only publish pieces under the pseudonym “Aristides,” thus disavowing the authorship of any other pseudonymous essays. Hanson wrote that such “a public avowal of the author” did not meet “with that disgust, which the signature of a man’s real name is sure to excite.”

A wide range of pseudonyms was used. Many were drawn from Greek and Roman history. Others came from English or American history. These pseudonyms reflected the historical and literary awareness of American readers. Writers usually chose pseudonyms that had connotations positive to republicanism. Brutus and Cato and many other Roman figures had been opponents of Caesar. Solon and Lycurgus were ancient Greek lawgivers. Harrington, Sydney, and Hampden were political or literary adversaries of the Stuart kings in their seventeenth-century struggle with the House of Commons. Some pseudonyms were commonplace in America (A Farmer, A Landholder, An Old Soldier, A Friend to Truth and Justice, etc.). Only a few of the thousands of pseudonymous pieces have been identified; most remain cloaked in the anonymity desired by their authors. Some Federalist printers in Boston, Portsmouth, N.H., and Savannah, Ga., refused to print Antifederalist items unless the authors left their names with the printer to be disclosed upon request. Antifederalists denounced this policy as an attempt to limit access to the press. Fear of reprisal was real, as Federalists dominated many of these towns. As a rule, however, newspapers remained open to all.

For an in depth analysis of the use of pseudonyms, see Gaspare J. Saladino, “[Pseudonyms Used in the Newspaper Debate over the Ratification of the United States Constitution in the State of New York, September 1787-July 1788](#),” in *New York and the Union*, edited by Stephen L. Schechter and Richard B. Bernstein (Albany, N.Y., 1990), 298-325. ■

