

“‘IMPROVING THE MINDS OF OUR FELLOW CITIZENS’:
PRINT AS A FORM OF INSTITUTION-BUILDING IN BRITISH AMERICA”

Michael D. Hattem
Yale University

Society for U.S. Intellectual History 2012 Conference
New York, New York, November 1, 2013.
[canceled due to hurricane]

*This is a working draft of a presentation paper.
Please do not cite or quote this paper without approval from the author.*

ABSTRACT: This paper explores how historians of late-colonial America may begin thinking of print as a form of institution-building in that, much as with institutions, communities formed around specific prints and periodicals that shared cultural and political ideologies and were dedicated to affecting cultural and/or political reform. The paper uses "The New England Courant" of 1720s Boston and "The Independent Reflector" of 1750s New York as case studies for this approach.

Throughout the first half of the eighteenth century in the urban Anglophone world, clubs and societies, or “voluntary associations,” became increasingly important social, cultural, and intellectual venues.¹ Meanwhile, the proliferation and availability of printed matter increased dramatically. Indeed, newspapers and broadsides became social, cultural, and intellectual venues in their own right. If we think of voluntary associations and institutions as creating a place and gathering resources that could either emerge from or help create and serve like-minded communities engaged in achieving broader goals, then I would argue that we can think of print in

¹ Peter Clark, *British Clubs and Societies 1580-1800: The Origins of an Associational World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Peter Borsay, “The Culture of Improvement,” in *The Eighteenth Century, 1688-1815*, ed. Paul Langford (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 183-210.

the same way. Like these associations and institutions, print also provided both the space (in its pages) and resources (in its content) that could help create and serve like-minded communities (of readers) engaged in a specific discourse and designed to achieve broad goals. In this paper, I would like to point out two examples of serial prints—and the communities that immediately surrounded them—published in the second-third of the eighteenth-century, the first in 1720s Boston and the second in 1750s New York City. In doing so, I hope to suggest intellectual links between them and consider how that might redirect our focus in terms of Enlightenment studies in colonial and revolutionary America.

On August 7, 1721, a third newspaper appeared on the streets of Boston. The city already had two papers in the *Boston Gazette* and the *Boston News-Letter*, the latter of which had been around for over seventeen years. Directly under the masthead, the *Gazette* proclaimed in large italicized letters that it was “Published by Authority.” Indeed, both were exceedingly friendly to the royal government and the Puritan hierarchy. Until this time, print had always been tightly controlled by the colonial governments. Securing a press and type from England and setting up a print shop in the colonies required a substantial investment. And, though New England, at least, had an unusually high literacy rate for the turn of the eighteenth century, the kind of readership that favored newspapers had not yet been developed. Therefore, sustaining a printing business usually required the patronage of being the government printer. However, in the 1720s, that began to change.

Boston already had a book trade that rivaled any outside London, but now a reading public hungry for news, whether for entertainment or business purposes, began to develop.² As the prospect for sustaining a printing business without government contracts emerged, so did the opportunity for a new kind of critical media. *The New-England Courant* was born at just this moment, founded by a young printer named James Franklin. There is some question whether James, the elder brother of Benjamin Franklin, had served an apprenticeship in England or in Boston.³ Nevertheless he spent the better part of 1718 in England where he was exposed to the mother country's lively print trade in newspapers and periodicals, the *belles lettres* of the Augustan Anglophone Enlightenment, and the often direct link between the two. Addison and Steele, Pope and Shaftesbury, Swift and Defoe, Trenchard and Gordon, and Samuel Johnson. English letters was already in the middle of a radical transformation in which a polite, urbane style of writing dressed up often devastating political, social, and religious criticism. For Franklin, the *Courant* was the vehicle in which he could bring that form of criticism to Boston.

What colonial writers attuned to Augustan belletrism and Anglophone Enlightenment thought tapped into most broadly was a relatively new form of highly critical anti-establishmentarianism. Unlike that of the seventeenth century, the anti-establishmentarianism of the first half of the eighteenth century was, broadly speaking, increasingly secular in nature. That is not to say that the authors were unreligious but their arguments and their criticism of the

² Carl S. Bridenbaugh, *Cities In The Wilderness: The First Century Of Urban Life In America, 1625-1742* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955, orig. 1938), 291.

³ J. A. Leo Lemay, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin, Vol. I* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 53-6.

establishment increasingly were, from the anticlericalism of *The Independent Whig* to the cultural criticism, particularly of elites, of *The Spectator* and the ubiquitous political critiques of corrupt Walpolean Whigs. Simply denying the fundamentality of religion and theology to society, politics, and culture—which it had enjoyed throughout the seventeenth century—was anti-establishmentarian. This impulse manifested itself in a literature and discourse of confrontation wrapped in a veneer of politeness and civility, a form which was to be adopted and molded in the colonies to its own particular contexts and purposes in part through the agency of print and the intent of small groups of individuals.

The first issue of the *Courant* appeared on August 7, 1721. Franklin recruited a group of literarily inclined malcontents ranging from Congregationalist church members to Anglicans to suspected Jacobites, from tanners to shopkeepers to physicians, and, eventually, an apprentice. They immediately courted controversy in the first issue by entering into the most contentious contemporary issue of the day in Boston, smallpox inoculation. Inoculation then was a new medical practice and there was a large sense of public skepticism about its efficacy. However, the conflict the Couranteers entered into was not primarily medical but political and cultural in nature.

Politically, in the 1720s, Massachusetts was split between two parties, commonly referred to as the New and Old Charter factions. In anticipation of James II's consolidation of the northern colonies into the Dominion of New England, the Lords of Trade had revoked the original Massachusetts charter in 1684. Following the Revolution of 1688, a new charter, secured

by the colony's agents, including Increase Mather, was granted to Massachusetts by William and Mary in 1691. Many New Englanders, however, had hoped for the restoration of the original charter. Persons of this political persuasion were referred to as the Old Charter Men while their opponents were known as New Charter Men. The core of the New Charter group were the royal officials and the Puritan church hierarchy including Cotton Mather. As would happen later in other colonies, a political dynamic emerged that pitted the popularly elected, Old Charter Assembly against the royal government, each trying to limit the prerogative of the other.

In May of 1721, a smallpox epidemic broke out in Boston. Mather, who had read about successful inoculations in the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, publicly urged instituting the practice in Boston with the support of royal officials. However, the public consensus, as well as that of the vast majority of physicians in Boston, strongly opposed it. Nevertheless, Zabdiel Boyston, a Boston doctor, began doing inoculations, starting with his own son and two of his slaves. So great was the clamor raised against him that the town's selectmen prohibited him from performing any more inoculations. It was at the height of this conflict that the *Courant* appeared.⁴

The city's other two newspapers had not included any anti-inoculation writings and that is exactly with what Franklin began the very first issue of the *Courant*. The lead piece in the first issue was written by John Checkley, a shopkeeper and ordained Anglican minister who would find himself involved in numerous paper and pamphlet wars throughout his long life. Checkley

⁴ John B. Blake, "The Inoculation Controversy in Boston: 1721-1722," *New England Quarterly* 25 no. 4 (1952): 490; Lemay, *Life of Benjamin Franklin*, 84.

had long been suspected of Jacobite inclinations and just over a year earlier he had been required to take an oath of allegiance to the crown. Checkley had written numerous pamphlets criticizing both Calvinist doctrine and the Puritan hierarchy of Massachusetts. At the close of an essay that thematically imitated the first issue of the *Spectator*, Checkley finished with three lines of verse attacking Mather and the rest of the pro-inoculators:

Who like faithful Shepherds take care of their Flocks
By teaching and practicing what's Orthodox,
Pray hard against *Sickness*, yet preach up the POX!⁵

Checkley's challenge—as would be the theme of the paper—was not so much about the inoculation controversy as it was about the power and role of the established church's clergy and their synergistic relationship with the royal government. Recognizing that drawing a response from the opposition constituted public recognition of a challenge to their authority, Franklin also included a few responses from their detractors; he also printed and advertised in the *Courant* a broadside responding to Checkley's piece in the first issue entitled, *The Little Compton Scourge: or, The Anti-Courant*, which referred to the paper's readers as "stupid." Though Checkley only contributed one more piece, the *Courant* and its various writers, particularly William Douglass, an Anglican physician, continued to engage the inoculation debate. As the epidemic abated in February of 1722, the paper became even more *Spectator*-like as the various writers assumed fictitious identities and responded to each other's essays in the form of letters to the paper. These essays continued to be critical of the New Charter Men, particularly the clergy. One of the

⁵ *The New-England Courant*, August 21, 1721.

paper's most notable contributors, Nathaniel Gardner, wrote numerous pieces attacking the clergy, often in dialogues and some in which men like Cotton and Increase Mather are represented by a character named "Academicus." In one dialogue, the clergyman responds, "But I find, *all the Rakes in Town* are against Inoculation, and that induces me to believe it is a right Way."⁶ Gardner even went so far as to write, "Most of the ministers are for it, and that induces me to think it is from the D—1."⁷ The usual theme of these dialogues was one in which the clergy or learned man claimed authority with no real justification beyond that they were "Ministers of the Gospel" and that, therefore, they were due passive obedience from the middling and unlearned ranks.

The reaction against the Couranteers, Franklin in particular, was swift. In addition to replies, published both in the city's other two papers as well as the *Courant*, Franklin was even accosted on the street by Cotton Mather.⁸ By June of 1722, Franklin was imprisoned by the General Court for a month for a seemingly innocuous criticism of the royal government's slow response to pirates. In January of the following year, he was prohibited from publishing the *Courant*, at which point his apprentice and younger brother, Benjamin, took over the publishing of the paper until he left for England nine months later. The *Courant* would continue on for another three years during which time it first turned toward a more genial belletristic form of

⁶ *The New-England Courant*, February 6, 1722.

⁷ *The New-England Courant*, January 8, 1722. Also, see *The New-England Courant*, November 6, 20, 1721, January 22, 1722.

⁸ *The New-England Courant*, December 4, 1721.

social commentary, such as Benjamin Franklin's Silence Dogood pieces. It never regained the criticality of thought nor the brashness of expression that it had enjoyed in its heyday. In the end, Franklin, Gardner, and the rest of the *Couranteers*, had come together as a like-minded group and used the *Courant* as a space in which they could achieve the goal of creating a public discourse that questioned notions of unjustified authority and passive obedience. They did this through a literature of confrontation that in the 1720s was new to the colonies both in its critical substance and its belletristic form.

Throughout the 1730s and 1740s, club life in the colonies grew, though most of the local clubs were either glorified, impolite drinking clubs or polite literary clubs that circulated their writings in manuscript among members only.⁹ Civic institution building also flourished in the form of sectarian colleges, but particularly in Philadelphia under the instigation of James's younger brother and former apprentice, Benjamin.¹⁰ Benjamin Franklin had learned a powerful lesson about the power of the collective, yet he took a much more benign and practical approach to institution building. Only later in the 1740s and 1750s did he become publicly engaged in the colony's political affairs, yet, even then, he never esteemed public confrontation as a valuable

⁹ Alexander Hamilton, *Gentleman's Progress: The Itinerarium of Dr. Alexander Hamilton, 1744*, ed. Carl Bridenbaugh (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948), 43; David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues & Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); David S. Shields, "Anglo-American Clubs: Their Wit, Their Heterodoxy, Their Sedition." *The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series* 51, no. 2 (1994): 293–304.

¹⁰ Jessica Choppin Roney, "'First Movers in Every Useful Undertaking': Formal Voluntary Associations in Philadelphia, 1725-1775," PhD diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 2008. For a continuation of the topic into the early national period, see Albrecht Koschnik, *"Let a Common Interest Bind Us Together": Associations, Partisanship, and Culture in Philadelphia, 1775-1840* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007).

tool.

Through the 1740s, public confrontation was something which the Anglican hierarchy in New York City had not been faced with too often, unless it was them doing the confronting. In some ways, the cultural hegemony enjoyed by Anglicans in New York City through the first half of the eighteenth century was even greater than that of Puritans in 1720s New England. Decades of activism by royal governors desperate to please the Ministry back home had only further entrenched the 1693 establishment of the Anglican Church in six southern counties of New York. Unlike in New England, royal governors in New York were of the same denomination as the established church and almost all major political offices were held by Anglicans. New York City, even in the 1740s, was quite pluralistic. The Dutch Reformed congregations enjoyed a peaceful co-existence with the Anglicans even as they were losing a fair number of their members to the Anglican Church, while Presbyterians and other smaller sects were looked upon suspiciously. Anyone who wanted to hold serious political office or even join the city's Anglican-dominated upper class were required to conform, at least outwardly, to the Church's theology and, especially, its broader world-view, furthering Anglican cultural hegemony in the city. Any institutions outside Anglican purview were inherently suspect.

In the late 1740s, the middle colonies and New York City in particular became the focal point of the SPG's missionary efforts, just as the second generation of native-born Anglican clergy were emerging into prominence in the city and the surrounding areas. Elders like Samuel Johnson and James Wetmore were leaders of a group of activist, High-Church Anglican clergy

that included younger men like William Smith, Thomas Bradbury Chandler, and Samuel Seabury, Jr. These men would go on to play significant roles in the Bishop controversy of the 1760s. With the backing of the SPG, the leaders in New York City longed to acquire the status and exercise the power and prerogatives that accrued to the Church hierarchy back in England.

Three young, Yale-educated Presbyterian lawyers pushed back against the Anglican cultural hegemony. William Livingston, a scion of one of the colony's most powerful dissenting families, William Smith, son of one of the colony's most prominent lawyers, and John Morin Scott, a future revolutionary leader in New York, became known as "the triumvirate." In 1748, they started a club they called the "Society for the Promotion of Usefull Knowledge," the presence of which they announced in a newspaper article that leveled a devastating critique of the city's cultural life, and, by extension, its cultural hegemons, the Anglican clergy.¹¹ Like the Couranteers, the club included "*Litterati of all Ranks*," including "a *Mechanick*," a "*Register*," and "a *Clerk*." The clergy, immediately suspicious of a group of young dissenters meeting for liberal conversation and learning, were aghast at their "boundless insolence" and immediately responded in print. They called it a "Whig club," where they drank toasts to "the immortal memory of Oliver Cromwell" and "plans [were] laid, schemes devised, and resolutions formed . . . of pulling down the Church, ruining the Constitution, or heaving the whole province into confusion."¹² The mere existence of such an association was a threat not only to the clergy's

¹¹ *New-York Weekly Journal*, February 13, 1749.

¹² *New-York Weekly Journal*, March 20, April 3, 1749.

social and political positions, but also the very ideology—based, as in New England, upon rigid hierarchy and passive obedience—from which they both derived those positions and believed society and government derived its stability.

In 1752, the triumvirate founded the colony's first non-newspaper periodical, *The Independent Reflector*, also the only such publication at the time in the entire colonies. Like the *Couranteers*, they were steeped in the Augustan writers, particularly Addison and Steele and Trenchard and Gordon. Though it has long been seen as primarily a “political” journal, the triumvirate used it as a vehicle for challenging the cultural hegemony of the clergy and “for correcting the taste and improving the minds of our fellow citizens.”¹³ In the sixth issue, Livingston attacked the Anglican clergy for their unprovoked attacks from the pulpit on a group of Moravians in New Jersey. He criticized the clergy for acting like “little popes” who attacked other sects “for believing in Christ, without worshipping the Clergy.”¹⁴ They were purveyors of “Priestcraft” who sought to “enfeeble or bind [the people] in the Fetters of Credulity,” in the hopes of establishing “an universal and absolute Dominion over the Minds of Men.”¹⁵ He called them “Doctors of Passive-Obedience” and purveyors of “political Christianity.”¹⁶ The large dissenting population of New York City made a receptive audience to this unprecedented public

¹³ William Livingston to Noah Welles, February 18, 1749, Johnson Family Papers, Yale University Library.

¹⁴ [William Livingston], “A Vindication of the Moravians, against the Aspersion of their Enemies,” *The Independent Reflector*, January 4, 1753.

¹⁵ [William Livingston], “Of Credulity,” *The Independent Reflector*, October 18, 1753.

¹⁶ [William Livingston], “Of Passive-Obedience,” *The Independent Reflector*, August 16, 1753.

effacing of the city's Anglican Church and its clergy, with sold-out back issues requiring reprinting for new subscribers.¹⁷

As in New England, the clergy responded in kind and in public, often in the *New-York Gazette*. They too resorted to insulting the author of the paper and its readers. The triumvirate continued their attacks on the clergy as the Anglicans sought to secure royal charter to establish a new college in the city. Concerned with the effects an Anglican-controlled college would have on the city both culturally and politically, the triumvirate opposed them arguing that any college should be established by an Act of Assembly, thereby retaining popular control. This debate consumed the city. The triumvirate even founded a second periodical, *The Occasional Reverberator*, in order to answer all the clergy's responses. Numerous pamphlets written by both sides appeared. The conflict over the college lasted for much of 1753 and 1754 until it was finally chartered by the King and, hence, christened King's College. In conciliation, Livingston was given a seat on the Board of Trustees and elicited a public promise that dissenters would not be discriminated against nor forced to attend Anglican services.

In 1754, the triumvirate turned their attention toward concrete institution building, founding the city's first public subscription library, the New York Society Library. Since the college had no library, they believed their library could act as something of an intellectual counterweight. They also subsequently founded a number of other voluntary associations and

¹⁷ See printer's notice in [William Livingston], "Public Virtue to be distinguished by public Honours: The Selling of Offices, which require Skill and Confidence, a dismal Omen of the Declension of a State," *The Independent Reflector*, January 25, 1753; William Livingston and others, *The Independent Reflector: or, Weekly Essays on Sundry Important Subjects*, ed. Milton M. Klein (Cambridge: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1962), 28-9.

institutions including the city's first legal society and extra-congregational religious association.¹⁸

These two publications—*The New-England Courant* and *The Independent Reflector*—and the groups surrounding them share three crucial similarities. First, they both used the print medium in unique ways in their respective times. *The Courant* was both the colonies' first literary periodical as well as its first opposition newspaper. *The Reflector* was not the first non-newspaper periodical—there had been a few short-lived attempts at publishing a magazine in Philadelphia—but it was the first to be wholly written by colonists. The *Courant* adopted and adapted the belletristic style and form of the *Spectator*. The *Reflector* sought to cultivate its readership by acquainting them with English Enlightenment ideas of toleration, natural religion, and contractarianism. Both sought to inform and persuade their readership by engaging in the major local issues of their time. Second, they were both group projects made up of outsiders to their colony's respective hegemonic cultures. Their publications contained conversations amongst each other but aimed at a broader public with reformist intent. And when one considers the subsequent institution building of Benjamin Franklin and the triumvirate, it becomes clear that both publications acted as a springboard toward the founding of more concrete institutions and associations. Colonial print historians often talk about newspapers' creation of imagined

¹⁸ On the legal society see “Minutes, 1770-1774, of the Moot Club of New York City,” New-York Historical Society. For the “Society for the Promotion of Arts, Agriculture, and Economy,” see *New-York Mercury*, December 3, 1764; *New-York Gazette*, December 17, 1764; On the “Society of Dissenters,” see *New-York Gazette*, July 24, 1769; *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, October 9, 1769; *New-York Mercury*, July 31, August 7, September 25, 1769; “The Society of Dissenters Founded at New York in 1769,” *American Historical Review* 6, no. 3 (1901): 498–507.

communities of readers, but these publications were produced by communities that were very real and impacted the local politics and culture. Finally, the *Courant* and the *Reflector* were both deeply anti-establishmentarian. Having mixed the detached pose and literary nature of the *Spectator* with the brashness of the *Independent Whig*, both groups challenged the hegemonic cultures in which they were produced. Anticlericalism was at the heart of both publications. Yet, in New England this meant the primarily Anglican Couranteers challenging the Puritan clergy while in New York it meant the Presbyterian triumvirate attacking the Anglican clergy.

Anticlericalism was a Protestant tradition often aimed at the Roman Catholic Church. Yet in these settings, it was not primarily sectarian or theological in nature. Rather, it derived from a broader streak of anti-establishmentarianism that ran through colonial society in the first half of the eighteenth century, on which political historians have long focused, though primarily in terms of the colonies' receptiveness to country or radical Whig political ideology.

Unlike literary clubs that circulated manuscripts privately, these two groups sought to engage the public in the polite and liberal terms often reserved for the elite and their private clubs. In 1972, Henry Steele Commager wrote, "The Old World imagined the Enlightenment and the New World realized it."¹⁹ This was followed a few years later by Donald Meyer's *The Democratic Enlightenment* and Henry May's *The Enlightenment in America*, which periodized the Enlightenment in four stages: the "Moderate Enlightenment," in which he includes the early eighteenth-century English writers, the largely inconsequential "Skeptical Enlightenment" of

¹⁹ Henry Steele Commager, "America and the Enlightenment," in *The Development of a Revolutionary Mentality*, ed. Richard B. Morris (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress, 1972), 7.

Hume, d'Holbach, and others, the political “Revolutionary Enlightenment,” and, finally, the diffused “Didactic Enlightenment” of the early nineteenth century, which set the stage for the revivalism to come.²⁰ More recent works—including those of James Delbourgo and Sara S. Gronim—have focused on colonists’ scientific endeavors.²¹

However, in these two examples, we can see a development within the Enlightenment in America, one which utilized print in new, exciting ways and built off the writers of May’s “moderate Enlightenment,” but, most importantly, one which sought to transmit to a broader audience larger ideas and notions, particularly those of challenging orthodoxy and traditional authority. Hence, there was a distinctly didactic impulse in the first half of the eighteenth century on the part of these two groups, out of which eventually grew independent cultural institutions designed to engage the public and provide alternative spaces, such as libraries, colleges, and popular improvement societies, for cultivation or cultural development. Historians remain reticent to address outright the possible existence of an American Enlightenment. But if, as Robert Darnton has written, the Enlightenment was not just “a set of propositions” but “a movement, an attempt to change minds and reform institutions,” then I would suggest that seeing these periodicals as a practice or form of institution building may point the way toward understanding the Enlightenment in America as not having been primarily, or at least not solely,

²⁰ Donald H. Meyer, *The Democratic Enlightenment* (New York: Putnam, 1976); Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).

²¹ James Delbourgo, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders: Electricity and Enlightenment in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Sara S. Gronim, “At the Sign of Newton’s Head: Astronomy and Cosmology in British Colonial New York,” *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 66 (1999): 55–85.

manifested in elite revolutionary political thought, elite private clubs, or elite scientific endeavors, but in the creation of independent cultural institutions with a much more popular aim and reach than is regularly acknowledged of the Enlightenment in America, or, dare I say it, the American Enlightenment.²²

²² Robert Darnton, "Two Paths Through the Social History of Ideas," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 359 (1998): 280.