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The Imperial Public Sphere: The Press, Publicity, and the Destabilization of the British Empire, c. 1695–1765

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Abstract

The arrival of an English translation of *The structural transformation of the public sphere* in 1989 set anglophone historians about revising Habermas's original explanation of the development of the public sphere in the eighteenth century. In particular, his 'model case of British development' came under fire. Notably absent from these many critical appraisals is consideration of the wider British empire. Herein lies the problem that this article addresses: the rise of a 'British public sphere' has been described in national terms, and as a result those communities that were living beyond the realm have been left out of the discussion. In essence, the dominance of the nation-state in historical studies has obscured another transitional phase through which a British public sphere began, and in the end failed, to integrate political communities in Ireland and the American colonies in the evolving political structures of the imperial state. By recovering the features of this 'imperial public sphere', and the colonial presses that brought it into existence, we can begin to transcend national frames of analysis and reassess where the national stories we have inherited fitted into the larger story of what was really still an age of empires.

Much has been made of the transformation of the public sphere in early modern Europe, and particularly in Britain. A wider conversation on the topic was sparked by the long-delayed appearance of an English translation of Jürgen Habermas's *The structural transformation of the public sphere*, in 1989.[1] The arrival of Habermas's landmark study in English led to a number of historiographical developments and revisions including the reassignment of the inception of a 'public sphere' in England to several earlier dates.[2] Along with this gradual marching back of a 'public sphere' has come debate over the inclusivity of this space as originally proposed.[3] However,

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[1] Jurgen Habermas, *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (Cambridge, MA, 1989).

[2] Peter Lake and Steven Pincus, *The politics of the public sphere in early modern England* (Manchester and New York, NY, 2007), pp. 1–30. See also Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the public sphere* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), pp. 1–48.

[3] Joan B. Landes, *Women and the public sphere in the age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 1988). See also Lake and Pincus, *Politics of the public sphere*, pp. 1–22.

very little has been asked of how the expansion of the empire corresponded, co-existed, or ran parallel to the development of a public sphere that has most often been described in national terms. In essence, the dominance of the nation-state in historical studies has obscured another transitional phase through which it began, and in a number of cases failed, to integrate political communities living outside of Britain in the evolving political structures of the imperial state – recovering this 'imperial public sphere' is the purpose of this article.

The question of why political communities living in the British empire began to react against imperial political and economic policy in more pronounced ways has been the subject of different approaches.[4] Historians have put forward a variety of competing factors including emerging national identities, religion, commercialization, and more recently political parties as central to the rise of an imperial crisis in the late eighteenth-century British Atlantic world.[5] Here, I suggest that whether political, national, religious, or economic factors were of the greatest influence, it was the gradual emergence of an imperial public sphere that enhanced individuals', communities', and interest groups' conception of their place and status within the empire, and in this way contributed to the destabilization of the empire in the second half of the century. Developing from the late seventeenth century, the imperial public sphere was reliant on a common political culture that came into being through earlier colonial endeavours and the growing ability of a press in multiple geographic locations to include publics in debates on an imperial level. It took shape and grew in definition alongside the institutions and infrastructure of the imperial state, colonial forms of self-government, and other less formal structures, and became a key battleground for debate over imperial policy, especially from the 1760s.[6] Establishing the nature of this imperial public sphere is critical, as the story of its development and collapse has the power to unite fragmented fields and divided historiographies. At the same time, analysis into the features and functions of the imperial public sphere will allow us to ask questions of socio-political and cultural importance about the formation of the modern Western world.

Of course, other questions quickly arise when thinking of the constitution of such a conceptual space as an early international, or perhaps more appropriately, a transnational public sphere let alone the publics that could make up such a structure. This article will argue that not only did such an informational and communicative structure come into existence, but also that it allowed multiple publics to act within the proposed conceptual space from urban centres in different territories of

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[4] For allegiance, see John Brewer, 'The eighteenth-century British state', in Lawrence Stone, ed., *An imperial state at war: Britain from 1689 to 1815* (London and New York, NY, 1994), p. 68.

[5] Kathleen Wilson, *The island race: Englishness, empire and gender in the eighteenth century* (London, 2002), pp. 29–53; J. C. D. Clark, *English society, 1688–1832: ideology, social structure and political practice during the ancien regime* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. ix–x; T. H. Breen, *The marketplace of revolution: how consumer politics shaped American independence* (Oxford, 2005), pp. xi–xviii; Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The birth of a consumer society: the commercialization of eighteenth-century England* (London, 1982); Steven Pincus, *The global history of the British empire, c. 1650–1784* (forthcoming, 2025).

[6] For state formation, see John Brewer, *The sinews of power: war, money and the English state, 1688–1783* (London, 1989); Michael J. Braddick, *State formation in early modern England c. 1550–1700* (Cambridge, 2000).

the British empire.[7] In this way, the imperial public sphere connected a number of local urban public spheres that were developing alongside local political cultures and institutions, and in relation to different forms of imperial government. This article focuses on contexts where a colonial press developed more fully and colonial resistance to imperial policy was strongest. However, in discussing the cases of Ireland and the American colonies, and resistance in the British Atlantic world, it will hopefully spark further questions and studies on the variegated textures of patriotism and loyalism expressed within the imperial public sphere, and work on other contexts like Canada, the Caribbean, and the British Pacific world, as well as comparison with the communicative structures of other empires like those of the French and Spanish.[8] The political cultures that developed in British ruled territories in each of the spheres mentioned above were derivative of a metropolitan political culture, and as a result colonial political communities modelled their own political practices and patterns on those of a metropolitan political community. But they were also distinct as local particularities emerged due to the diversity of circumstances and the contingency of events, and as a result taking any more than the two discussed here into account would limit the space needed to set out the complexity of these comparative cases.

In his convincing account of the Scottish and Neapolitan Enlightenments, John Robertson harkened back to the comparative theory of French historian Marc Bloch in an attempt to rehabilitate the idea of a common Enlightenment discourse.[9] In doing so, he stressed both the similarities and differences of the Enlightenment experiences of Scotland and Naples. In what follows, the scene will be set for something similar. A discussion of the advent, and analysis of the formation, of the imperial public sphere will be carried out and the developing information and communication infrastructure of the empire will be explored in Britain, Ireland, and the American colonies. However, rather than a common Enlightenment discourse, it is a set of related patriot discourses that emerged in the British Atlantic which come into focus here. These related forms of colonial patriotism grew up alongside local political institutions and cultures and out of a shared imperial culture, developing with increased pace from the end of the Seven Years War to the eve of the American revolution.[10]

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[7]For these publics and territories, see Nicholas Canny and Philip Morgan, eds., *The Oxford handbook of the Atlantic world, 1450–1850* (Oxford, 2011). For informational and communicative structures of the empire, see Ian K. Steele, *The English Atlantic, 1675–1740: an exploration of communication and community* (New York, NY, 1986); Steven Pincus, Tiraana Bains, and A. Zuercher Reichardt, 'Thinking the empire whole', *History Australia*, 16 (2019), pp. 610–37, at pp. 621–4.

[8]For example, see Philip J. Stern, 'British Asia and British Atlantic: comparisons and connections', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 63 (2006), pp. 693–712.

[9]John Robertson, *The case of the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680–1760* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 1–9. See also Marc Bloch, *The historian's craft* (New York, NY, 1953).

[10]John Murrin, 'The great inversion, or court versus country: a comparison of revolution settlements in England (1688–1721) and America (1776–1816)', in J. G. A. Pocock, ed., *Three revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776* (Princeton, NJ, 1980), p. 386. See also Eliga H. Gould, *The persistence of empire: British political culture in the age of the American revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); idem, 'A virtual nation: Greater Britain and the imperial legacy of the American revolution', *American Historical Review*, 2 (1999), pp. 476–89; Margaret Jacobs and James Jacobs, eds., *The origins of Anglo-American radicalism* (London, 1984); Ian McBride, '"The common

It will be argued that the expansion of the periodical form of print, particularly the newspaper, and the press that came to wield the publicity it offered, was central to this development.Through the 'news', individuals, even those excluded from direct political participation, were given a level of political agency. This was made possible by the printing of metropolitan and local news and reports of events of political significance, but also through the publicizing of petitions, and other forms of colonial public opinion that were emerging, be they expressions of loyalty to the king, or patriot critiques and protests against imperial policy.[11] This 'imagined' participation in a common political culture is related to, but quite different from, Anderson's concept of the 'imagined community' which theorized and outlined the roots of modern nationalism in the early modern world. Here, we are not speaking of national identities or, for that matter, the formation of national communities, but rather of the publics and counterpublics that acted within, and indeed constituted, the imperial public sphere.[12]

I

In thinking about the development of the public sphere in new ways, it is important, and necessary, to return first to the original concept to see how it has changed, or been revised, over time.[13] This leads directly to Habermas's account, which has been the source, touchstone, and standard starting point for studies of the public sphere. Although his was primarily a sociological study, Habermas's historical conclusions, which were mainly focused on identifying and delineating a public sphere in historical time that had, since that time, been corrupted by the forces of capitalism and the evolution of the modern welfare state, required historical backing and analysis. This led him to posit the time, place, and developments needed for the arrival of a 'bourgeois public sphere'.[14] The 'model case' was to be England in the eighteenth century.[15] The stage had been set by a series of well-rehearsed developments at the end of the seventeenth century including the creation of the Bank of England, the establishment of the first cabinet of government, which contributed to 'the parliamentiarization of state authority', and the lapsing of the Licensing Act, which allowed the press and print culture to flourish in new ways.[16]

The thrust of his argument encouraged him to outline this theoretical unit in ideal form:[17] a republic of letters, where universal access allowed an enlightened public to live, move, and find its being in a new realm that rose up between society

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name of Irishmen": Protestantism and patriotism in eighteenth-century Ireland', in Tony Claydon and Ian McBride, eds., *Protestantism and national identity: Britain and Ireland, c. 1650–c. 1850* (Cambridge, 1998).
    [11]Brodie Waddell and Jason Peacey, eds., *The power of petitioning in early modern Britain* (London, 2024); David Zaret, *Origins of democratic culture: printing, petitions, and the public sphere in early modern England* (Princeton, NJ, 2000); James E. Bradley, 'The British public and the American revolution: ideology, interests, and opinion', in H. T. Dickinson, ed., *Britain and the American revolution* (London, 1998), pp. 124–54.
    [12]Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, 1983).
    [13]Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the public sphere*, pp. 4–5.
    [14]Habermas, *Structural transformation*, pp. 27–56.
    [15]Ibid., pp. 57–67.
    [16]Ibid., pp. 58–9.
    [17]Ibid., pp. 43–51.

and the state.[18] The origins of this development were wrapped up not only in the expansion of the rational critical discourse of an earlier 'literary public sphere' to other topics including the political, but also in the transformation of the very base of society, the family.[19] At the same time, the depersonalization of state authority combined with the emergence of this rational public to allow a new form of being. Civil society, mediated through the public sphere, allowed private persons, taken together as the 'public', to comment critically not only on the nature of the state and its features, but also on its current policies and methods of government and economics.[20] In essence, for the first time a public could hold the state to account in an abstract way not just in the chatter of the common room of taverns, the polite conversation taking place at the tables of coffee shops, the popular protests of the public square, or the drama of the crowd in the theatre of the street.[21] The activities of agents of the state were now susceptible to public critique through the invocation of new terminology in print, including 'the sense of the people' or later in the eighteenth century, 'public opinion'.[22] In this new-found public realm, the profusion of public discourse, set free from state censorship, allowed for the expression of new freedoms, or at least induced individuals to formulate and later push for these freedoms and rights.[23] Although when these freedoms were realized they almost always failed to extend beyond insular understandings of 'the people' and 'the public'.[24]

Criticisms of Habermas's original historical model have come from all quarters. These have included, most prominently, disagreements over who could actually participate in the public sphere as originally outlined by Habermas due to literacy, gender, religion, and other ethno-linguistic barriers.[25] Others have argued over timing, and still others over the 'bourgeois' in the term itself.[26] In one piece worth noting, Harold Mah strikes at the core of the historical criticisms of Habermas's approach. In doing so, Mah beckons the historian back to the fact that Habermas was aware of the idealist nature of his configuration and claims from the beginning, and

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[18]Ibid., pp. 51–6.

[19]Ibid., pp. 31–51.

[20]Ibid., p. 27.

[21]Ibid., p. 32.

[22]Mark Knights, *Representation and misrepresentation in later Stuart Britain: partisanship and political culture* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 5–8. See also Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, politics and public opinion in late eighteenth-century England* (Oxford, 1998); Kathleen Wilson, *The sense of the people: politics, culture, and imperialism in England, 1715-1785* (Cambridge, 1995); J. A. W. Gunn, *Beyond liberty and property: the process of self-recognition in eighteenth-century political thought* (Kingston and Montreal, 1983); Paul Langford, *The excise crisis: society and politics in the age of Walpole* (Oxford, 1975).

[23]For example, see John Wilkes, *Arms of liberty and slavery: to the gentlemen, clergy, and freeholders of the county of Middlesex* (London, 1768). See also Marie Peters, 'The monitor on the constitution, 1755–1765: new light on the ideological origins of English radicalism', *English Historical Review*, 86 (1971), pp. 706–25.

[24]John Brewer, *Party ideology and popular politics at the accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), p. 141.

[25]Habermas, *Structural transformation*, p. 37. For critiques, see Landes, *Women and the public sphere*; J. A. Downie, 'How useful to eighteenth-century English studies is the paradigm of the "bourgeois public sphere"?', *Literature Compass*, 1 (2004), pp. 1–19. See also Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the public sphere*, for trenchant criticisms of Habermas's original description, especially chapters by Nancy Fraser and Geoff Eley.

[26]Harold Mah, 'Phantasies of the public sphere: rethinking the public sphere of historians', *Journal of Modern History*, 72 (2000), pp. 153–82.

has restated this even more publicly since.[27] His purpose was not to write a purely historical account of the public sphere, but a sociological treatise that made use of history for one strand of his larger argument.[28] This does not diminish the importance of the historical correctives that have come, but it does call for a reassessment of the current status of the public sphere as a historical subject.

Historians have already been at work in this regard. Peter Lake and Steven Pincus have offered a complete reworking of the concept and the transformations it underwent in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England.[29] David Zaret has proposed a sociological reframing of the concept in the seventeenth century, and Mark Knights has extended analysis of the public sphere, through what he terms a 'shift towards a representative society', into the first quarter of the eighteenth century.[30] But these works, and others, focus almost solely on the emerging nation-state and say very little about an expanding empire and how other political communities and reading publics were incorporated in the political structures of the developing imperial state. In light of this elision, and the phenomenon I have described above, it is clear that some explanation is needed for how a British public sphere was transformed by the empire, and how the empire transformed a British public sphere.

The model I am proposing here is less concerned with a 'republic of letters', and instead interrogates those Janus-faced features by which a 'public sphere' would pull larger groups of people into political understanding, and acting, but at the same time maintain certain measures of exclusion and invent new methods for keeping out the gendered, ethnic, enslaved, and religious 'other'.[31] In essence, how did the public sphere function as a space in which civil society could sprout up, but at the same time keep certain counterpublics at bay?[32] If we subject earlier models of a 'republic of letters', or the more embryonic 'literary public sphere', to a sterner test, and many others have, it is easy to see that those who could contribute new thought to this discourse were few and far between.[33]

Participation in this sphere, as first described, was indeed an impossibility for the majority of the populace. Therefore, it is important to think about the ways in which a 'public sphere' expanded to encompass larger portions of the population over time, and also how this led to new methods of domination from above but also new demands of inclusivity from below. In this sense, it is vital that we think critically about a 'plebeian public' that was present to some degree in the eighteenth century but largely ignored in *The structural transformation*.[34]

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[27]Ibid. See also Habermas's statement in *Structural transformation*, p. 56, 'Women and dependents were factually and legally excluded from the political public sphere.' See also Jürgen Habermas, 'Further reflections on the public sphere', in Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the public sphere*, pp. 421–61.

[28]Habermas, *Structural transformation*, pp. xvii–xix.

[29]Lake and Pincus, *Politics of the public sphere*, pp. 1–22.

[30]Zaret, *Origins of democratic culture*, pp. 3–17; Knights, *Representation and misrepresentation*, p. 3.

[31]Habermas, *Structural transformation*, pp. 56–7.

[32]For counterpublics, see Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy', *Social Text*, 25/6 (1990), pp. 56–80; Michael Warner, *Publics and counterpublics* (New York, NY, 2002).

[33]Landes, *Women and the public sphere*, p. 7.

[34]Brewer, *Party ideology*, pp. 163–200.

This is not meant to lead to an account of the rise of the public sphere as a precursor of the modern democratic state, or publics as the proto-nations of the modern nation-state. Instead of a model of steady and gradual progression, the one offered here highlights the many switchbacks, roadblocks, and regressions of popular participation in the political process. At the same time, the alternative approach being described here does not look back anachronistically in suggesting the eventual, or rather gradual, coming of commodification as sounding the death knell of the public sphere.[35] In this account, the commercialization of print culture is seen to be a major factor in more people gaining access to the public sphere from its beginning, the 'consumer revolution' being a central feature of the expansion of this realm and early mass media as a simultaneously enlightening and propagandistic feature in the equation.[36] But for commercialization to be a factor we must also speak of urbanization,[37] of people congregating in places, and in ways, that could constitute and justify the usage of the term 'public'.

In this way, London is central to this account, at least in the beginning. Indeed, at the start of the eighteenth century the metropole was at the heart of the empire and not just physically but also culturally, religiously, economically, and politically.[38] Until a certain point in time the public, and indeed the nation, being spoken to, and of, was in a large part the population of London. The integration of information and communication infrastructure across England, Britain, Ireland, and eventually the American colonies, West Indies, and Canada was really about connecting these places more closely with London. This would facilitate the flourishing of a shared imperial political culture, a culture most easily accessed, and interacted with, in urban centres and towns across the empire. In this way, late early modern cities and towns in the British empire were centres on the periphery, but in certain cases they would help to transform peripheries into new political cores.[39] These growing urban centres were seats of power that gained legitimation through their own power structures and the connectedness of these with the ultimate base of power, the imperial capital, and also to a lesser degree in their connection with one another – although the importance of these connections was to shift and change over time.[40]

In essence, then, this is a conversation about how power was expressed, how people were governed, how they reacted to the methods used, and in what ways this changed the structure of the developing fiscal-military state, which meanwhile was expanding territorially and gearing itself to become a more structurally sound and

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[35]Habermas, *Structural transformation*, pp. 89–140.

[36]McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *Birth of a consumer society*, pp. 1–6, 253–62.

[37]Peter Clark, ed., *The Cambridge urban history of Britain*, II: *1540–1840* (Cambridge, 2018); Peter Borsay and Lindsay Proudfoot, 'The English and Irish urban experience, 1500–1800: change, convergence and divergence', in Peter Borsay and Lindsay Proudfoot, eds., *Provincial towns in early modern England and Ireland: change, convergence and divergence*, Proceedings of the British Academy, 108 (Oxford, 2002), pp. 1–28.

[38]Brewer, 'The eighteenth-century British state', p. 66. See also Julie Flavell, *When London was capital of America* (New Haven, CT, 2010), pp. 1–6.

[39]For 'core' and 'periphery', see Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-systems analysis: an introduction* (Durham, NC, and London, 2004). See also Jack P. Greene, *Peripheries and center: constitutional development in the extended polities of the British empire and the United States, 1607-1788* (New York, NY, and London, 1990).

[40]For one example of these connections, see [John Hancock], *An address of the twelve united colonies of North America by their representatives in congress to the people of Ireland* (Philadelphia, PA, 1775).

economically extractive imperial state.[41] An imperial public sphere was to become critical to the mediation between this imperial state and colonial urban centres that began to exert their own centralizing tendencies in the second half of the century. Indeed, it was through this sphere that the various publics of the empire came to engage with, and critique, the political and economic policy of the imperial state, and participate in the debate surrounding that policy. Their engagement with, and contribution to, this critical debate was a later development informed by their cultural identification as Britons and a shared cultural heritage.[42]

The imperial public sphere was reliant on this shared political culture, which developed first through engagement with metropolitan print culture, then in the production of derivative print cultures in colonial settings from the beginning of the eighteenth century, and eventually in the ability of colonial commentators to not only comment on metropolitan news, as well as news of events taking place elsewhere in the empire, but also to contribute to debates taking place on an imperial level from the 1760s. In this way, the imperial public sphere allowed publics in Ireland and the American colonies to express their opinion publicly and collectively and also to organize petitions and protests in opposition to the power structures of the empire.[43] As a result, it allowed political communities beyond the realm to challenge imperial authority as the eighteenth century wore on. But how did all this occur? In answering this question, it is to a familiar feature that we must turn in beginning to set out an explanation for the development of an imperial public sphere.

II

The lapsing of the Licensing Act in 1695 has always appeared as a significant development in accounts of the public sphere, and while these accounts have correctly moved back early iterations of an 'English' public sphere before this event, to factor in other forms of communicative action, be they oral or manuscript in transmission, the act is crucial to the expansion of this 'English' public sphere into something that should carefully be labelled 'British'.[44] The removal of censorship this act entailed is of course important but it was really the disestablishment of the stationers' guild and the explosion of not only printing, but printing presses, that should be noted here.[45]

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[41]Brewer, *The sinews of power*, pp. 165–6; Aaron Graham, 'The colonial sinews of imperial power: the political economy of Jamaican taxation, 1768–1838', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 45 (2017), pp. 188–209; Aaron Graham and Patrick Walsh, eds., *The British fiscal-military states, 1660–c. 1783* (London, 2016).

[42]Eliga Gould, 'Revolution and counter-revolution', in David Armitage and Michael J. Braddick, eds., *The British Atlantic world, 1500–1800* (Basingstoke and New York, NY, 2002), pp. 208–9.

[43]For petitions and petitioning, see James E. Bradley, *Popular politics and the American revolution: petitions, the crown and public opinion* (Macon, GA, 1986); Philip Loft, 'Petitioning and petitioners to the Westminster parliament', *Parliamentary History*, 38 (2019), pp. 342–61; Waddell and Peacey, eds., *The power of petitioning*.

[44]Tim Harris, 'Publics and participation in the Three Kingdoms: was there such a thing as "British public opinion" in the seventeenth century?', *Journal of British Studies*, 56 (2017), pp. 731–53.

[45]For the lapsing of the Licensing Act, see Bob Harris, *Politics and the rise of the press: Britain and France, 1620–1800* (London, 1996), pp. 6–28.

Up until that time, London had held all printing responsibilities, except for the university towns of Oxford and Cambridge, for all of England, Wales, and Scotland.[46] It was, in essence, the disseminator of print and in many ways of official information altogether. Whereas in Ireland, the patent of the King's Printer was contested and supplanted at a slightly earlier date, and in the American colonies it was still several years before a solitary printing press in Boston began printing anything other than religious material.[47]

The corresponding expansion of printing, and printers, would perhaps lead the reader to see this as a decentralizing phenomenon through which other cities, towns, regions, provinces, and colonies could gain a press and print culture that was distinct from that originating in the metropole, and while it began this process, it would in fact lead first to many models of the original.[48] It also set up a situation in which the early printing endeavours outside of London, in provincial Britain, Ireland, and the American colonies, aped the practices and methods which had been the standard, and in that sense the only possibility of which they were aware as continental parallels fell behind London in the eighteenth century.[49] Already, one can begin to see how the foundation of commercial print culture outside of England, and more appropriately print cultures as they would begin to develop local particularities from the outset, were set by those who viewed themselves as the 'English' abroad and modelled themselves on their metropolitan examples and connections.[50] The language was of course vernacular English and access was limited to the literate and more elite segments of colonial populations.

However, this is not to be dismissive of oral communication, rumour, and gossip as earlier catalysts of politicization and certainly not to equate print culture with the public sphere, which was reliant on print but also something more, a point that draws us usefully back to the second stage of Habermas's account which has largely been ignored by historians of the eighteenth century.[51] This is not surprising as this was Habermas's description of the medieval incarnations of publicity, which were primarily encapsulated in an earlier 'court culture'.[52] What Habermas described as 'representative publicness' was wrapped up in the royal office and person of the king or queen, and the 'publicness' of the royal presence which was transmitted through a

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[46] Bob Harris, 'Print culture', in H. T. Dickinson, ed., *A companion to eighteenth-century Britain* (Oxford, 2002), p. 284.

[47] Suzanne Forbes, *Print, party, and politics in Ireland, 1689–1714* (Dublin, 2018), p. 14; Gary Nash, *The urban crucible: social change, political consciousness, and the origins of the American revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1979), p. 85.

[48] Robert Munter, *The history of the Irish newspaper, 1685–1760* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 14–15; Michael Warner, *Letters of the republic: publication and the public sphere in eighteenth-century America* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), p. 4.

[49] See Hannah Barker and Simon Burrows, *Press, politics, and the public sphere in Europe and North America, 1760–1820* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 5–6. For 'the news' in other European contexts, see Andrew Pettegree, *The invention of the news: how the world came to know about itself* (New Haven, CT, 2014), pp. 1–14; B. Dooley, ed., *The dissemination of news and the emergence of contemporaneity in early modern Europe* (Farnham, 2010).

[50] Jonathan Swift, *A letter to the whole people of Ireland* (Dublin, 1724); Benjamin Franklin, *The interest of Great Britain considered, with regard to her colonies, and the acquisitions of Canada and Guadaloupe. to which are added,...* (London, 1760).

[51] Harris, 'Publics and participation', p. 736.

[52] Habermas, *Structural transformation*, pp. 8–14.

court that gathered round due to the gravitational pull of power.[53] The king or queen wielded this 'publicness' by simply appearing before audiences, inspiring awe and 'publicity' through the materiality of their royalty, and the presentation of the royal person and sovereign power of the state in physical form before a public audience.[54]

The reason for highlighting this feature of Habermas's account is that it is important to point out that these spatial features of the public sphere did not disappear with the arrival of a world of print, but were instead transformed just as publicity was. The representative capabilities of print had already opened up new avenues for publicity but it was the ability of the news to capture and cover collective political action as it developed that increased its power to change human behaviour. The news expanded the power of publicity in this way, at the same time that power and sovereignty were gradually being abstracted. In England, the Glorious Revolution was the second time an English 'public' had triumphed over a king and in these two triumphs we can begin to see how sovereignty was abstracted in this way, as power clearly shifted to some degree from the court to the depersonalized institution of parliament, but also to a public itself which was seen to have executed one king and deposed another.[55]

In this sense, it was the people represented in print as the 'public' who were sovereign as the locus of power shifted incrementally from the divine right of the king to *salus populi suprema lex.* This phenomenon can be glimpsed in the representation of the public as the ultimate arbiter, presiding publicly over the execution, or removal, of a king. When this representation of the public or political community was spread through pamphlets, newsletters, and increasingly through newspapers that travelled far and wide, individuals, even those located outside of the political nation, could participate in the event on another level by identifying with, or imagining themselves, as part of the represented public appearing in these reports. For example, the *London Mercury* and *English Currant* described the rapturous scene of William entering London in 1688.[56] But you did not have to be present in the parades that welcomed William or James to side with one of them, as publics and political communities read and discussed the news and joined in the debate from cities, towns, and villages across the empire.[57]

In this way, we can see how the news had the potential to become a powerful conduit of opinion. Tim Harris has asked whether there was such a thing as public opinion in the 'Britannic archipelago' in the seventeenth century, but the effects of the lapsing of the Licensing Act and the explosion of news media would take

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[53] Ibid., pp. 8–10.

[54] Ibid., pp. 9–10. See also Jonathan Healey, 'The fray on the meadow: violence and a moment of government in early Tudor England', *History Workshop Journal*, 85 (2018), pp. 5–25, at pp. 18–23.

[55] Habermas, *Structural transformation*, pp. 58–9. See also Knights, *Representation and misrepresentation*, p. 36; H. T. Dickinson, 'The eighteenth-century debate on the sovereignty in parliament', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 26 (1976), pp. 189–210. See also Tim Harris, *Revolution: the great crisis of the British monarchy, 1685–1720* (London, 2006).

[56] *London Mercury*, 18–22 Dec. 1688; *English Currant*, 14–19 Dec. 1688.

[57] Richard S. Dunn, 'The Glorious Revolution and America', in Nicholas Canny, ed., *The Oxford history of the British empire*, I: *The origins of empire: British overseas enterprise to the close of the seventeenth century* (Oxford, 1998). See also Carla Gardina Pestana, *The English Atlantic in an age of revolution, 1640–1661* (Cambridge, MA, 2007).

some time to be felt.[58] Indeed, it was in the eighteenth century that the news was to become a major channel for opinion and not just in the 'Britannic archipelago', but also in the British Atlantic world. This interpretation of how increased publicity facilitated political participation, and allowed for the formation of public opinion, in historical time is a significant divergence from the Habermasian conception of the public sphere.[59]

In revolutionary moments and times of political upheaval, other publics and peoples acted politically in space and time, but now their actions were represented in the news that traversed the Atlantic world, and in this sense publicity enhanced the power of popular politics in local and imperial public spheres. This was especially true when a colonial press came into existence that could amplify the reaction of colonial publics against imperial policy, and publicize the political action of these colonial publics against the empire. If earlier identification allowed a level of imagined participation or agency in the removal and replacement of kings for people in Ireland, the American colonies, Canada, the Caribbean, and even further afield, protests against and over-reaching imperial British parliament offered wider publics in these places the opportunity to act politically in real and tangible ways.

By publicizing protests against parliamentary policy, and eventually publishing essays defending the sovereignty of their own forms of self-government, printers, editors, and correspondents not only made colonial public opinion into a more powerful force, they also gave colonial peoples a new level of political agency. Reports of the death of 'A Mollatto man named, Johnson', later identified as Crispus Attucks, in the Boston Massacre and descriptions of the 'tumultuous Assembly' at the centre of the anti-union riots that rocked Dublin in 1759 reveal how the developing press even extended publicity to excluded groups in certain cases.[60] But the participatory potential of the press was limited by the exclusionary structures of colonial societies, even as publicity was opened up to wider populations and introduced new political possibilities.[61] These possibilities prefigure an 'alternate structure of politics' proposed by John Brewer in his revisionist account of the 1760s, but how did this structure, which Brewer identified as the press, stretch beyond England and to the wider empire?[62]

III

The transmission of metropolitan newspapers, periodicals, and other print culture to the American colonies was still very slow in the late seventeenth and early

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[58] Harris, 'Publics and participation', pp. 732–5.

[59] Habermas, *Structural transformation*, p. 56.

[60] *Boston Chronicle*, 8 Mar. 1770; *Boston News-Letter*, 8 Mar. 1770; *Dublin Gazette*, 1 Jan. 1760.

[61] For the participatory limits of the press and print in Ireland, see Niall O Ciosain, *Print and popular culture in Ireland, 1750–1850* (London, 1997); Vincent Morley, *The popular mind in eighteenth-century Ireland* (Cork, 2017). For the American colonies, see David Waldstreicher, *The odyssey of Phillis Wheatley: a poet's journey through American slavery and independence* (New York, NY, 2023); Jordan E. Taylor, 'Enquire of the printer: newspaper advertising and the moral economy of the North American slave trade, 1704–1807', *Early American Studies*, 18 (2020), pp. 287–323; Joseph Rezek, 'The racialization of print', *American Literary History*, 32 (2020), pp. 417–45.

[62] Brewer, *Party ideology*, pp. 139–60.

eighteenth centuries, if somewhat more regular to Dublin.[63] But if things were sluggish in neighbouring kingdoms and far-flung colonies, as it took some time for policy to manifest at such distance and even then it was never straightforward, they were rapid in London and spread more quickly across Britain.[64] The creation of a penny post meant an even more interconnected capital, as the various hubs of London bustled with a profusion of clubs and societies.[65] At the same time, the building of roads and the digging of canals allowed the increased flow of goods to the capital, but also of information and print culture out to growing cities, towns, and villages. All of these things allowed London to exert itself as the cultural centre of the empire in even greater ways, and this cultural dominance was soon to be matched in the political realm as the great political figure of Walpole strode onto the stage and consolidated the power of a Whig political arrangement that was to dominate the second quarter of the eighteenth century.[66]

New political circumstances are often the root of new political ideas, innovations, and responses. The reaction to the Walpole administration would be no different, though any legitimate political threat was still decades in the future. The utter dominance of the Whig government induced a new form of opposition politics and ushered new levels of political opinion into the periodical form of print. Earlier government usage of the press and propaganda by Robert Harley, later the first earl of Oxford, who had patronized such talented pens as Swift, Defoe, and Toland, had provided a model for Walpole, and the Whigs purchase of the *London Journal* set up a situation which resulted in another innovative approach to the form of the periodical and another elemental development in the formation of a political press in England, and a British press more generally.[67] However, the most important example of this novel approach was not to be the Whig mouthpiece, but rather its chief rival in print.

The *Craftsman*, established in 1726, represents the emergence of a new approach to political reporting that came in response to the changed political circumstances of the 1720s. If the purpose of earlier periodical essays was to 'instruct' the public on 'Transactions of the State' the modus operandi of the *Craftsman* was instead to offer critical political opinion on the current methods and policy of government,

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[63]Carolyn Nelson, 'American readership of early British serials', in Robin Myers and Michael Harris, eds., *Serials and their readers 1620–1914* (Winchester, 1993), pp. 27–44; James Raven, 'Serial advertisement in 18th-century Britain and Ireland', in Myers and Harris, eds., *Serials and their readers*, pp. 103–24; Munter, *History of the Irish newspaper*, pp. 67–90.

[64]Steele, *English Atlantic*, pp. 115–16. See also Jeremy Black, *The English press: a history* (London, 2019).

[65]Peter Clark, *British clubs and societies, 1580–1800* (Oxford, 2000), p. 93; McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb, *Birth of a consumer society*, pp. 231–62. For the penny post, see Howard Robinson, *The British post office: a history* (Princeton, NJ, 1948), pp. 64–76.

[66]For the classic account, see J. H. Plumb, *The growth of political stability in England 1675–1725* (London and Basingstoke, 1967). For an early critique of the 'stability' thesis, see Linda Colley, *In defiance of oligarchy: the Tory party, 1714–1760* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 4. See also Jeremy Black, *British politics and society from Walpole to Pitt, 1742–1789* (London, 1990). For the cultural dominance of London, see Harris, 'Print culture', p. 288. For 'English culture', see John Brewer, *Pleasures of the imagination: English culture in the eighteenth century* (London, 1997).

[67]J. A. Downie, *Robert Harley and the press: propaganda and public opinion in the age of Swift and Defoe* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 58–9; Habermas, *Structural transformation*, p. 60.

and expose the corruption of the ruling party.[68] The reign of the Whigs was a very different political reality from that of the rage of party that ran before it, and the retreat of the Tories into political wilderness set the scene for the development of an early model of an opposition political journal.[69]

In Ireland, according to Robert Munter, 'a genuinely Irish' voice had taken shape in the form of an Irish press by the 1720s.[70] However, in agreement with Ian McBride, I would suggest that this was, for the most part, the voice of the Protestant Anglo-Irish population of Ireland most densely located in the second largest city of the British empire, Dublin.[71] This had much to do with the presence of the Irish parliament, which was Protestant in composition and primarily concerned with maintaining its firm grip on power, but newspapers also developed in Cork, Belfast, Kilkenny, Limerick, and elsewhere from the 1730s onwards. In making this point it is important to note that the Irish-speaking population also generated a rich manuscript and oral culture of its own, which engaged to some degree with newspapers, but very little of this literature was transferred into print reducing its potential penetration into the political public sphere. On the other hand, the first serious attempts by a more integrated segment of the Catholic population to infiltrate Dublin's public sphere in the English language would not come until the 1760s in the work of Charles O'Connor and John Curry.[72]

Despite these linguistic and other barriers, Irish-speaking and bilingual communities did engage with English language newspapers from an earlier date, and in doing so, used their subversive readings to mobilize reactions to imperial and local governance. Indeed, it is clear in the work of Éamonn Ó Ciardha that Irish-speakers and the Gaelic literati were already engaging with the press and public discourse in the seventeenth century, and over the course of the eighteenth century shifting methods of governance, the emergence of a Catholic merchant class in urban centres, and linguistic patterns of diglossia began to create the circumstances through which new opportunities would emerge for Catholics to participate in political life in cities and towns.[73]

Nevertheless, the developing public sphere of Dublin was a rather exclusive reserve, a characteristic that could perhaps obscure another phenomenon – signs of

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[68] *Tatler*, 12 Apr. 1709; *Tatler*, 16 Apr. 1709.

[69] Colley, *In defiance of oligarchy*, pp. 10–12.

[70] Munter, *History of the Irish newspaper*, pp. 167–8.

[71] McBride, '"The common name of Irishmen"', p. 237. See also T. C. Barnard, 'Protestantism, ethnicity and Irish identities, 1660–1760', in Claydon and McBride, eds., *Protestantism and national identity*.

[72] [Charles O'Connor], *The case of the Roman-Catholics of Ireland. Wherein the principles and conduct of that party are fully explained and vindicated* (Dublin, 1766); [John Curry], *Historical memoirs of the Irish rebellion, in the year 1641. Extracted from parliamentary journals, state-acts, and the most eminent protestant...* (London, 1767); [John Curry and Charles O'Connor], *Observations on the popery laws* (Dublin, 1771).

[73] Éamonn Ó Ciardha, *Ireland and the Jacobite cause, 1685–1766: a fatal attachment* (Dublin, 2004), pp. 39–40. See also O Ciosain, *Print and popular culture*, p. 6; Lesa Ni Mhunghaile, 'Bilingualism, print culture in Irish and the public sphere, 1700–c. 1830', in James Kelly and Ciaran Mac Murchaidh, eds., *Irish and English: essays on the Irish linguistic and cultural frontier, 1600–1900* (Dublin, 2012); Morley, *The popular mind*; idem, 'Irish political verse and the American revolutionary war', *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, 1 (2007), pp. 25–60; idem, 'Irish Jacobitism, 1691–1790', in James Kelly, ed., *The Cambridge history of Ireland*, III (Cambridge, 2018); Aidan Doyle, 'Language and literacy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries', in Kelly, ed., *The Cambridge history of Ireland*, III.

a local Anglo-Irish identity emerging from the beginning of the century.[74] In unravelling the peculiarities of this Anglo-Irish identity, the confusing figure of Jonathan Swift provides a useful example. Indeed, Swift helps to illustrate the complexity of cultural formation and identity creation in early eighteenth-century Dublin. Others, including Lord Molesworth and John Arbuckle, were perhaps less enigmatic in their attempts to express new configurations of 'Britishness' in the Irish setting. In newspapers including the *Dublin Weekly Journal*, established in 1725, and the *Tribune*, established in 1729, Anglo-Irish identity was described as something 'English' but also simultaneously as something else.[75] The role Arbuckle played in articulating these new configurations is representative of the presence of Protestant dissenters in this process of identity formation.[76] It also clear in these newspapers that the self-image of an Anglo-Irish population in Dublin, and Ireland, was influenced by representations in the London press and the print culture being produced in the capital. In this sense, print allowed a dislocated kind of interaction with metropolitan culture and society, and as a result the Anglo-Irish certainly experienced an 'othering' of sorts through the everyday lived experience of a 'provincial' population grouping.[77]

Even further afield in the American colonies, newspapers had appeared in the three largest urban centres of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia by the 1720s.[78] Unlike Dublin, each of these colonial capitals was really more of a large town, as only Boston eclipsed 10,000 inhabitants at the time. However, in the first half of the eighteenth century they gradually grew into commercial centres that compared favourably with British and Irish provincial ports including Hull, Bristol, Glasgow, and Cork.[79] They also functioned as the political centres of colonies that were to varying degrees diverse, but whose governance, in a similar way to Ireland, was dominated by Protestant Anglo-colonial elements of the population. As a result, the local political cultures and public spheres that were developing in these cities alongside evolving forms of local and imperial government tended to reflect the shared imperial political culture described above.[80] Over the course of the century, other urban centres emerged that were large enough to support a newspaper including Williamsburg, Baltimore, Hartford, New London, New Haven, and Charleston, and in

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[74]Barnard, 'Protestantism, ethnicity and Irish identities'; D. W. Hayton, 'Anglo-Irish attitudes: changing perceptions of national identity among the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland, ca. 1690–1760', *Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 17 (1987), pp. 145–57.

[75]*Dublin Weekly Journal*, 6 Nov. 1725. See also Joel Herman, 'Imagined nations: newspapers, identity, and the Irish free trade crisis of 1779', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 35 (2020), pp. 51–69.

[76]Richard Holmes, 'James Arbuckle and Dean Swift: cultural politics in the Irish confessional state', *Irish Studies Review*, 16 (2008), pp. 431–44; idem, *The literary career of James Arbuckle, 1717–1737* (Bristol, 2012); Michael Brown, *Francis Hutcheson in Dublin, 1719–1730: the crucible of his thought* (Dublin, 2002).

[77]D. W. Hayton, *The Anglo-Irish experience, 1680–1730: religion, identity and patriotism* (Woodbridge, 2012), pp. 25–48; James Livesey, 'The Dublin society in eighteenth-century Irish political thought', *Historical Journal*, 47 (2004), pp. 615–40, at pp. 628–9. See also T. C. Barnard, *A new anatomy of Ireland: the Irish Protestants, 1649–1770* (New Haven, CT, 2003).

[78]Nash, *Urban crucibles*, p. 33.

[79]Ibid., p. 54.

[80]For the public sphere in the American colonies, see 'Forum: alternative histories of the public sphere', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 62 (2005).

this way the publics in each of these cities and towns became more aware of their political position within the empire.

In both Ireland and the American colonies, local representative forms of government developed in urban centres over time, and unique constitutional and legislative arrangements emerged.[81] The politics of inclusion and exclusion were written along different lines in each context, but the similarities are also striking.[82] In both places, shared imperial and local power arrangements grew increasingly antagonistic as the century wore on. This negotiation of how power and sovereignty was to be shared between imperial and local law-making institutions led to a kind of tug-of-war politics, which reveals the internal tension of the developing imperial public sphere.[83] This tension was an outgrowth of the reality that people were simultaneously being shaped as citizens of both local and imperial governments, and at the same time that they were being incorporated into an imperial public sphere their own local public spheres were growing in definition alongside other features of their colonial societies and systems of government. The press was one such feature, and a particularly important one, as it fashioned political communities as both local and imperial publics by harvesting a great deal of material from metropolitan newspapers and sources but also increasingly from local ones. In this way, local public spheres emerged through which political communities could react, comment on, or protest against colonial forms of government, and at the same time on another level, imperial ones.

All the while, webs of correspondence flowed across the territories of the empire connecting literate elite and middling sections of the population in each location in networks of trade, business, and less formal relationships such as family.[84] The transmission of print culture and all types of information gradually increased through the growth of information infrastructure and the frequency at which information was conveyed and received. This infrastructure was supported by government policies aimed at improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the application of

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[81]For Ireland, see Patrick McNally, *Parties, patriots, and undertakers: parliamentary politics in early Hanoverian Ireland* (Dublin, 1997), pp. 148–73. See also D. W. Hayton, James Kelly, and John Bergin, eds., *The eighteenth-century composite state: representative institutions in Ireland and Europe 1689–1800* (Basingstoke, 2010); Eoin Magennis, *The Irish political system, 1740–1765* (Dublin, 2000); Julian Hoppit, ed., *Parliament, nations and identities in Britain and Ireland, 1660–1850* (Manchester, 2003). For representative forms of government in the American colonies, see Mary Sarah Bilder, *The transatlantic constitution: colonial legal culture and empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), pp. 1–12; idem, 'English settlement and local government', in Michael Grossberg and Christopher Tomlin, eds., *The Cambridge history of law in America*, I (Cambridge, 2008), pp. 63–103. See also Craig Yirush, *Settlers, liberty, and empire: the roots of early American political theory, 1675–1775* (Cambridge, 2011); Bernard Bailyn, *The origins of American politics* (New York, NY, 1968); Greene, *Peripheries and center*; Robert J. Dinkin, *Voting in provincial America: a study of elections in the Thirteen Colonies, 1689–1776* (Westport, CT, 1977).

[82]In Ireland, the major dividing line was confession, whereas in the American colonies it was race. See Patrick Griffin and Francis D. Cogliano, *Ireland and America: empire, revolution, and sovereignty* (Charlottesville, VA, 2021), pp. 1–22; Trevor Burnard, *Writing early America: from empire to revolution* (Charlottesville, VA, 2023), p. 64.

[83]For the complexities of imperial sovereignty, see Lauren Benton, *A search for sovereignty: law and geography in European empires, 1400–1900* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 4–6.

[84]Lindsay O'Neill, *The opened letter: networking in the early modern British world* (Philadelphia, PA, 2015), pp. 1–2. See also Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of letters: letter manuals and transatlantic correspondence, 1688–1820* (Cambridge, 2005); Susan E. Whyman, *The pen and the people: English letter writers, 1660–1800* (Oxford, 2009).

imperial power across distance in times of war and peace, but also through the growing Atlantic economy and the corresponding expansion of networks of trade and commerce, which connected port cities across the Atlantic world.[85]

Through these developments, metropolitan print culture found its way into the hands of readers in Ireland and the American colonies.[86] At the same time, news of colonial affairs became a more regular feature in London, and newspapers in Ireland and the American colonies grew into producers of news in their own right even as they continued to reprint news taken from their metropolitan progenitors. Communities in all three places imagined 'Britishness' in diverse ways, and through distinct print cultures multiple configurations of 'British' identity took shape in local urban public spheres – a process that was informed by the discursive currents flowing through the imperial public sphere.[87]

However, publicity, as a medium of political participation, and the associated political possibilities the press offered those out of doors, was still to be fully realized in Irish and American urban centres. This is without mentioning those groups that found themselves at the margins of these developing public spheres and beyond the bounds of these new configurations of British identity – Catholics, and to a lesser degree Presbyterians, in Ireland and enslaved and Native American peoples in the American colonies.[88] These groups did find unofficial ways to make their voices heard, but the rigid racial and confessional exclusionary regimes of colonial societies remained a firm reality.[89] It is clear that political print culture was more developed in the Irish capital than in any urban centre in the American colonies, mainly due to the size and dynamic growth of Dublin and the opportunities provided by a large resident parliament.[90] But even if the American colonies did not yet have urban centres that could compare to the city of Dublin, literacy rates were much higher outside of population centres in the colonies. On the other hand, in London the evolving power of the press was becoming more apparent. In the capital, newspapers were beginning

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[85]For port cities and the interconnections of the Atlantic economy, see Jessica Choppin Roney, 'Introduction: distinguishing port cities, 1500–1800', *Early American Studies*, 74 (2017), pp. 303–32, which was part of a special issue on the topic. See also David Dickson, '"Seven sisters?" The seaport cities of mid-eighteenth-century Ireland', in Thomas M. Truxes, ed., *Ireland, France and the Atlantic in a time of war* (Abington, 2017); David Hancock, *Citizens of the world: London merchants and the integration of the British Atlantic community, 1735–1785* (Cambridge, 1995); Breen, *Marketplace of revolution*.

[86]Nelson, 'American readership', pp. 27–44; Raven, 'Serial advertisement', pp. 103–24.

[87]Stephen Conway, 'From fellow-nationals to foreigners: British perceptions of the Americans, circa 1739–1783', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 59 (2002), pp. 65–100.

[88]Wilson, *The island race*, pp. 4–15.

[89]For race, religion, identity, and the empire, see Catherine Hall and Keith McClelland, eds., *Race, nation and empire: making histories, 1750 to the present* (Manchester, 2010). For resistance in Ireland, see James S. Donnelly, 'The Whiteboy movement, 1761–5', *Irish Historical Studies*, 21 (1978), pp. 20–54. For the nature of resistance in the American colonies and Atlantic world, see Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The many-headed hydra: sailors, slaves, commoners, and the hidden history of the revolutionary Atlantic* (New York, NY, 2000).

[90]For example, see Patrick McNally, 'Wood's Halfpence, Carteret, and the government of Ireland, 1723–6', *Irish Historical Studies*, 30 (1997), pp. 354–76; Isolde Victory, 'The making of the Declaratory Act of 1720', in Gerard O'Brien, ed., *Parliament, politics and people: essays in eighteenth-century Irish history* (Dublin, 1989).

to offer a wider public opportunities to engage in popular political reactions against governmental policy, and particularly parliamentary policy.

The excise crisis of 1733 provides early evidence of how the newspaper was to increase the force of 'public opinion' in the capital, and eventually in the British empire.[91] But how did the press begin to make 'public opinion' into a political force that could be used to hold the government to account, and in some cases cause the reversal or overturning of policy? The answer, at least in part, is publicity. Indeed, the increased negative publicity that could now be turned on unpopular political policy through constantly updated and regularly appearing newspapers brought public opinion to bear in a more forceful way than pamphlets had in the past – a point that is made obvious over the long run by the eventual transcendence of the newspaper and the gradual decline of pamphlets. In this sense, the excise crisis represents one of the first times a British press used public opinion in this way, and in doing so, contributed to the construction of a social movement in the name of a popular cause through the publicity of the newspaper. In this case, a British public was animated against a parliamentary attempt to introduce new methods of taxation.

In response to this new excise tax, introduced by Walpole and the Whig ministry, the opposition press helped to mobilize opinion out of doors by crafting a narrative that was opposed to governmental policy and regularly updated in newspapers. In doing so, the press contributed to the emergence and consolidation of a popular social movement that was powerful enough to force the government to change course. Due to the growth of the provincial press in Britain, narratives of resistance flowed out from London, into provincial newspapers, and back inwards forming myriad representations of a united movement animated against the government, and particularly against parliament.[92] This allowed both a real and imagined kind of political participation for all those who read, listened to, or heard the news being discussed. It also opened another relatively new possibility – the public being arranged in opposition to the political and economic policy instituted by parliament and the potential reaction of this 'public', or in the future other colonial 'publics', to methods of taxation. It was in shaping the representation of this public reaction to an act of taxation that the *Craftsman* and other newspapers continued to form and strengthen the role of the press in politics. In the sense that as the press spoke to, and at the same time for, the 'public', it was increasingly able to invoke 'public opinion', and in doing so, mobilize wider parts of the population, and encourage new kinds of popular engagement in politics.

In this way, the excise crisis serves as an early, if underdeveloped, model of how the press could co-ordinate the reaction of a metropolitan public, and other 'British' publics, against the policy of the British parliament.[93] At the same time, it foreshadows later popular social movements in which colonial presses directed political communities in Ireland and the American colonies to react in similar, and more

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[91]For public opinion and the excise crisis, see Langford, *The excise crisis*, pp. 151–71.

[92]Wilson, *Sense of the people*, pp. 123–36; Brewer, *Party ideology*, pp. 158–9. See also G. A. Cranfield, *The development of the provincial newspaper, 1700–1760* (Oxford, 1962).

[93]For reactions to the excise crisis in colonial contexts, see Jacob Price, 'The excise affair revisited: the administrative and colonial dimensions of a parliamentary crisis', in Stephen Baxter, ed., *England's rise to greatness, 1660–1763* (Oakland, CA, 1983), pp. 257–322.

aggressive, ways against imperial political economic policy. In these later movements, resistance to imperial policy that occurred in local urban public spheres could then spread outwards through the dissemination of news reports describing events of political protest via the imperial public sphere. But it is also important to note another feature at hand that is significant to later arguments. Indeed, the events of the excise crisis contributed to a process of political inversion through which the 'country tradition', of which the *Craftsman* is representative, but also the writings of John Trenchard, Thomas Gordon, and others, began to be reimagined by merchants and trading interests in 'urban' centres.[94]

It is significant that in the excise crisis we find the main proponents of this 'country tradition' spearheading a movement of urban populations in opposition to an act meant to protect 'landed interest'. In Paul Langford's analysis, 'The shopkeepers and tradesmen of England were immensely powerful as a class, scarcely less so in electoral terms than those country gentlemen whom Walpole sought to gratify.'[95] This statement brings greater clarity to this process of inversion as an earlier 'country interest' was beginning to be reimagined and transformed into a popular ideology of free trade and commerce with the potential to unite urban and commercial population groups against the policy of parliament.[96] This serves to highlight the fact that, perhaps somewhat ironically, it was in urban settings that evolving forms of political 'patriotism', which were to some degree derived from the 'country tradition', held the greatest potential to inspire popular political opposition. It was in the second half of the century that these patriotisms developed into more defined political programmes, but it is clear that the city was becoming the site of protest from an earlier date.[97] This was a result of the fact that urban centres, and cities in particular, held the requisite conditions for social and political movements including the necessary population base, and a press to report protests, represent 'public opinion', and co-ordinate 'public' action. But perhaps most significantly, the city housed the object of protest itself, institutions of government, and other related symbols of political power.

It would be some time before a press in Ireland or the American colonies could mobilize similar reactions to power, and force the British parliament to overturn legislation. Although political communities were able to nullify imperial policy, such as in the case of Wood's Halfpence in 1720s Ireland, or the Molasses Act of 1733 in the American colonies, the newspaper press was not yet able to use public opinion against policy in the same way in these settings. The newspaper *Common Sense* should be noted for its wide circulation in the British Atlantic world and patriot programme. However, the role of a colonial press is less clear in the earlier reactions it helped to publicize. On the other hand, reactions which emerged in the second

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[94]J. G. A. Pocock, 'Radical criticisms of the Whig order in the age between revolutions', in Jacobs and Jacobs, eds., *The origins of Anglo-American radicalism*, pp. 36–7.

[95]Paul Langford, *A polite and commercial people: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1989), p. 30.

[96]For 'Patriotism' and the 'Country Party', see Max Skjönsberg, 'Patriots and the Country Party tradition in the eighteenth century: the critics of Britain's fiscal-military state from Robert Harley to Catharine Macaulay', *Intellectual Historical Review*, 33 (2023), pp. 83–100.

[97]For patriotism and political parties in eighteenth-century Britain, see Max Skjönsberg, *The persistence of party: ideas of harmonious discord in eighteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge, 2021).

half of the century in Ireland and the American colonies saw a colonial press lead campaigns to successfully overturn parliamentary policy.[98] The most clear examples were the Money Bill Dispute in Ireland and the Stamp Act Crisis in the American colonies, which represent a more clear and comprehensive response from political communities in Ireland and North America.

The Money Bill Dispute of 1754–6 provides an early example of the increased role of a colonial press in politics, the pressure this was to put on imperial political arrangements, and the challenges it introduced to administering policy at distance.[99] The reallocation of an Irish surplus to the British establishment, and the reaction of Irish publics to this reallocation of funds, helps to illustrate the growing ability of an Irish press to animate a popular response to imperial economic policy in Dublin's public sphere. The policy decision was used by Irish MPs, most prominently by then speaker of the House of Commons, Henry Boyle, to stir up opinion in their favour. Irish newspapers, like the *Universal Advertiser*, represented the Irish parliamentary struggle as a patriotic response to imperial over-reach that impinged on the rights of 'British' subjects.[100] The ability of an Irish press to successfully use Irish public opinion against British policy also reveals how colonial presses were beginning to turn colonial public opinion into a political force.[101] However, Boyle's long reign, which has led to his being branded the 'Irish Walpole', would end with a British title – a fact which serves as an example of the limits of the radicalism of Irish patriotism.[102] This was a radicalism that was animated in a large part by an Anglo-Irish brand of Whiggism, and the assumption of political rights that were ultimately derived through British traditions including Magna Carta and the Glorious Revolution.[103] The presence of these 'British' sources of patriotism in Irish newspapers during the Money Bill Dispute is a reminder that the political culture that had developed in the Irish capital remained to some degree derivative even as it was distinct.[104]

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[98] Albert B. Southwick, 'The Molasses Act – source of precedents', *William and Mary Quarterly*, 8 (1951), pp. 389–405. For more recent work on the Molasses Act, see also Eva Landsberg, 'Sons of liberty and sons of slavery: inter-colonial conflict and identity in the 18th-century British Atlantic', Conference Paper at the National Conference on British Studies (Baltimore, MD, 2023).

[99] For the Money Bill Dispute, see Jacqueline Hill, '"Allegories, fictions, and feigned representations": decoding the Money Bill Dispute, 1752–6', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 21 (2006), pp. 66–88; Declan O'Donovan, 'The Money Bill Dispute of 1753', in D. W. Hayton and Thomas Bartlett, eds., *Penal era and golden age: essays in Irish history, 1690–1800* (Belfast, 1979).

[100] *Universal Advertiser*, 2 Feb. 1754; *Universal Advertiser*, 14 Feb. 1754; *Universal Advertiser*, 4 Jan. 1755. See also James Kelly, 'Political publishing, 1700–1800', in Raymond Gillespie and Andrew Hadfield, eds., *The Oxford history of the Irish book*, III (Oxford, 2006), pp. 227–9.

[101] Martyn J. Powell, *Britain and Ireland in the eighteenth-century crisis of empire* (Basingstoke, 2005), pp. 14–15.

[102] Hill, '"Allegories, fictions, and feigned representations"', pp. 84, 71–9. See also J. L. McCracken, 'The conflict between the Irish administration and parliament', *Irish Historical Studies*, 10 (1942), pp. 159–79.

[103] *A letter to a member of the H[ouse] of C[ommon]s of I[relan]d on the present crisis of affairs in that kingdom* (London, 1753); *The conduct of a certain member of parliament, during the last session* (Dublin, 1755). See also James Kelly, '"Era of liberty": the politics of civil and political rights in eighteenth-century Ireland', in Jack P. Greene, ed., *Exclusionary empire: English liberty overseas, 1600–1900* (Cambridge, 2010); Bob Harris, *Politics and the nation: Britain in the mid-eighteenth century* (Oxford, 2002).

[104] Hill, '"Allegories, fictions, and feigned representations"', pp. 87–8.

The event is also useful in illustrating the tinderbox that was governance as the British empire evolved gradually from a multiple monarchy into an imperial state.[105] This required the development of new imperial policy as political arrangements across the empire were a mishmash rather than uniform.[106] This was a state of affairs that led imperial administrators, in the aftermath of the Seven Years War, to begin a process of integration and centralization.[107] If the war had proven anything it was that the British empire was an unwieldy thing, and the interest groups and power structures that were making it so had to be brought under some level of control.[108]

One of the acts of legislation that marks out this changing policy was the Stamp Act of 1765 – an act that was met head on by a colonial press that had developed in the American colonies through the newspapers being printed in urban centres there. A direct comparison between the Money Bill Dispute and the Stamp Act Crisis is useful not only for marking out the similarities of the political languages used to attack parliamentary policy, as Magna Carta and the Glorious Revolution featured regularly in essays appearing in the newspapers being printed in the cities and towns that dotted the Atlantic seaboard, but also the differences in the negotiation between imperial and colonial authorities within the imperial public sphere. It is clear that the greater the distance the more complex and difficult these negotiations became. At the same time, the Stamp Act debate reveals, in a different way from the Money Bill, how the tyranny of distance could no longer keep a common policy conversation from emerging within the imperial public sphere – a conversation that could now draw in the entire Atlantic world.[109] However, distance continued to determine the nature of this conversation. The one-way journey of the news and public information was always faster than the return trip needed for an imperial response to be issued, and this ensured that the policy conversation or debate that was now possible through the press contributed to the destabilization of the empire.

The reaction of colonists to the imposition of stamp duties demonstrates not only the ability of this press to represent colonial public opinion and contribute to an oppositional movement that swept up urban populations in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, but is also clear proof that the imperial public sphere was beginning to operate in new ways as the debate over the Stamp Act spilled over into newspapers appearing in London, Dublin, and elsewhere. Even as parliament introduced new policies to raise revenue and armies, and worked to implement these policies, competing provincial and colonial power structures continued to develop in response to local demands. This set imperial and local colonial forms of government on a crash course, as they always had been, but with greater consequence and immediacy as ministers in the British parliament sought to reduce war debt through new taxes and increase the efficiency of the fiscal and military apparatuses of the imperial state.

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[105]Brewer, *Sinews of power*, pp. xiii–xxii.

[106]David Armitage, 'The American revolution in Atlantic perspective', in Canny and Morgan, eds., *The Oxford handbook of the Atlantic world*, pp. 516–32.

[107]Patrick Griffin, *The age of Atlantic revolution: the fall and rise of a connected world* (New Haven, CT, 2023), pp. 50–81.

[108]Ibid., pp. 50–2; Gautham Rao, *National duties: custom houses and the making of the American state* (Chicago, IL, 2016), pp. 21, 34–44.

[109]*Postage Act 1765* (5 Geo 3 c. 25, 10 Oct. 1765). See also Richard Bourke, *Empire and revolution: the political life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, NJ, 2017), pp. 282–91.

The colonial presses that had now developed in Ireland and the American colonies brought imperial political relations under greater pressure at this time, as many of the newspapers that were being printed in urban centres in each context pushed back against this new wave of imperial policy.[110] In examining the ways in which the press began to affect the relationship between local and imperial centres of power in more significant ways, it is clear that increased news infrastructure was allowing the integrative functions of local and imperial public spheres to grow in power. In this sense, local newspapers were tying urban populations in Dublin, Belfast, Cork, New York, Boston, and Philadelphia more tightly to local political institutions at the same time as the metropolitan news they reprinted was integrating these populations in the political world of London and the political processes of the imperial state.[111] However, these integrative functions came to clash in more serious ways in the 1760s as political communities beyond the realm identified the centralizing policy of the imperial state as a threat to local autonomy and resisted in more vigorous and concerted ways than they had before. One of the reasons that this resulted in increased political conflict, and the emergence of an ongoing imperial crisis, when it did was the growth of colonial public opinion as a political force and an assertion of local legislative sovereignty in the British empire.

Indeed, the events of the Stamp Act reveal how the press in the American colonies was now able to represent popular political action and political opinion as being opposed to imperial policy, and in this way use public opinion against the British parliament in a similar way to the British press during the excise crisis. But the resulting debate was now being carried on not just in London and Britain, but in other parts of the empire as well. The news was now bringing the different political communities engaged in this debate into closer contact with one another, and in doing so, connecting local public spheres more closely within the imperial public sphere, and with the ultimate site of legislative sovereignty within the empire, the British parliament.

As a result, local news produced in reaction to imperial policy had the power to connect political communities across space, though of course with some delay. Despite the significant time lag involved in news crossing the Atlantic, the flow of information was constant, which meant there was no major dearth or gap in the arrival of news. In this way, the publicity of newspapers was opening up political participation or agency to wider urban populations through the dissemination of news of colonial opposition to imperial policy, and in doing so, increasing the power of popular politics in the wider British empire. This was a development which suggests the possibility that the 'alternate structure of politics' described by Brewer may not have been limited to England.[112]

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[110]Joel Herman, 'A political turn of the Irish newspaper, c. 1760–1770', in Toby Barnard and Alison Fitzgerald, eds., *Speculative minds in Georgian Dublin: novelty, experiment and widening horizons* (Dublin, 2023), pp. 91–106; idem, 'The imperial crisis in the news, c. 1760–1780: news and newspapers as a source for writing transnational histories', in Brendan Dooley and Alexander Samuel Wilkinson, eds., *Exciting news! Event, narration and impact from past to present* (Leiden, 2024), pp. 242–60.

[111]Joel Herman, 'Elections in the news: a transnational view of electoral cultures in the British empire', in Matthew Grenby and Elaine Chalus, eds., *Electoral culture, political media and popular participation in England 1715–1832* (forthcoming, Woodbridge).

[112]Brewer, *Party ideology*, pp. 139–62.

In his description of how the press changed politics, Brewer described how colonial reactions against imperial policy allowed for the transmission of new ideas back into the London public sphere.[113] He claimed that these ideas influenced parliamentary reform movements that emerged later in the century.[114] The concept of an imperial public sphere might help to explain how this transmission of political ideas and culture was possible. At the same time, it can also be used to show how colonial presses began to change politics on a wider imperial level. In reading newspapers that were being printed in London, Ireland, and the American colonies at the time, it is clear that this was the case, as the news was now an effective conduit for colonial public opinion and was increasingly allowing political communities to engage in a common conversation or debate.

On 8 February 1766, the front page of the *London Evening Post*, a leading opposition paper, was filled with news of colonial resistance to the Stamp Act including a letter describing the situation in New York:

> Such are the unhappy times occasioned by the Stamp Act, that scarce any business is carried on. Our port is shut, no vessels cleared out; no law and no money circulating; in short, all traffick and trade seems to be at an end...A great many Merchants that can pay, will not, in order to prevent remittances from being made to your part of the world. The People of the Province seem to have such an aversion to taking the Stamp Papers, that they will sooner die than take them. What the event will be is really to be dreaded.[115]

The newspaper also described events in Boston where a ship captain burned 'stampt papers' to keep patriots from burning them in a more 'public manner'.[116] Reports of popular political action, political essays, and printed petitions appearing in colonial newspapers, which gave convincing proof that public opinion in the American colonies had turned decisively against imperial policy, were now flowing into metropolitan newspapers, but they were also appearing elsewhere.

Indeed, events relating to the Stamp Act were given similar coverage in a patriot newspaper printed on the same day in Dublin. The *Freeman's Journal* included an earlier letter from Philadelphia that defended the 'Privilege of Britons...not to be taxed but by their own Representatives, and in doing so, made direct reference to colonial 'Opinion':

> Now when the People of England see what we are contending for...there is not, we think, an honest Man in the Kingdom but will join us in Opinion; and we do therefore pray you, if you have any regard for Liberty, our Liberty, your Liberty, our Peace and Happiness, as well your own; for depend upon it, one

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[113]Ibid., pp. 201–16.
[114]Ibid., pp. 211–16.
[115]*London Evening Post*, 6–8 Feb. 1766. See also *London Chronicle*, 6 Feb. 1766; *London Chronicle*, 8 Feb. 1766; *Public Advertiser*, 8 Feb. 1766; *Public Advertiser*, 10 Feb. 1766.
[116]*London Evening Post*, 6–8 Feb. 1766.

cannot subsist without the other; exert yourselves to deliver us from the Yoke attempted to be cast over our Necks.[117]

Subsequent issues of the Irish newspaper were dominated by the popular political action being taken in the American colonies.[118] But only two days later, a piece of news printed in the *New-York Gazette* was referencing the 'opinion' of the 'people of Ireland'. The paper informed a New York public 'that the Ministry in England held councils twice every week, on affairs of this continent', and that 'the people of Ireland are highly pleased at the opposition the Stamp Act meets with in America' and 'their general toasts are *Destruction to the American Stamp Act*'.[119]

The three newspapers referenced here were printed within a few days of each other but many miles apart. They are intriguing in the way that they report similar events happening in different locations at different times, but more importantly in the way that they connect these events and the political action and opinion of publics through the publicity of the press. In this way, the colonial press, and newspapers, of the 1760s allowed individuals, communities, and publics to join in a policy conversation from urban centres across the Atlantic world. At the same time, the success of the American colonists in forcing the British parliament to repeal the Stamp Act reveals how the emergence of an imperial public sphere had allowed colonial public opinion to become a political force in the wider British empire.

IV

This article has described a transitional phase in the development of the public sphere. In doing so, it has shown how the conversation this imperial public sphere was beginning to allow, through the development of colonial presses in Ireland and the American colonies, was destabilizing legislative and constitutional arrangements within the empire. Rather than drawing the political communities of the empire into closer union, this shared conversation drove them apart, as colonial political communities reacted against the centralizing policy of the British parliament. The Stamp Act Crisis is a particularly useful example of how this was beginning to occur as it demonstrates not only how the imperial public sphere was making popular political action into a more potent force, but also how newspapers in these places could now represent this action, and also letters, essays, petitions, and other political matter, as 'public opinion'. In this way, a press in Ireland and the American colonies was now using colonial public opinion as a force to apply pressure on the legislative structures of the imperial state, and in certain cases causing the British parliament to temporarily change course. However, the determination of imperial officials to continue along a similar path and their inability to control the press, and political narrative, increased the likelihood of escalation.

Narratives of colonial resistance that emerged in response were increasingly shaped in local public spheres by developing forms of patriotism, which were related

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[117] *Freeman's Journal*, 4–8 Feb. 1766.

[118] *Freeman's Journal*, 4–8 Feb. 1766. See also *Dublin Journal*, 18 Jan. 1766; *Belfast Newsletter*, 7 Feb. 1766; *Belfast Newsletter*, 11 Feb. 1766.

[119] *New-York Gazette*, 10 Feb. 1766. See also *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 6 Feb. 1766; *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 13 Feb. 1766; *Boston Gazette*, 3 Feb. 1766; *Boston Gazette*, 10 Feb. 1766.

to British patriotism and the traditions of a 'Country' ideology. The press and these unique, and yet related, forms of patriotism developed alongside one another, and in this way the news shaped larger patriot narratives of the corruption of the imperial state. Events of popular protest, and other forms of popular politics, increasingly factored in these narratives, and were depicted as part of an ongoing struggle against the political and economic policy of an over-reaching British parliament. It was through participation in such events, and reports of these events appearing in newspapers across the empire, that a certain level of political participation was opened up to wider populations in urban centres. People in England, Ireland, and the American colonies read news reports of the events of the Stamp Act, heard them read, or debated, and made sense of these events through a shared 'British' imperial culture, but at the same time reacted against the structures that had allowed this shared culture to come into being.

Publicity was now offering individuals across the empire, even those located outside of the political nation, a real sense of political agency through the publicizing of political action and other events of political significance in the news that flooded local and imperial public spheres. In the decade that followed, a political press in London, Ireland, and the American colonies increasingly represented the political action of publics taken against imperial policy, and in doing so, acted as a temporary check on imperial power, invited the masses into politics in new ways, and contributed to the fuller emergence of an imperial public sphere. By increasing the power of colonial public opinion and political action but failing to generate answers to the question of how sovereignty could be shared between the imperial British parliament and colonial forms of self-government, the imperial public sphere destabilized political relations in the British empire and contributed to the revolutionary outcomes that followed.