

„Convince the world that they were not fictitious“ – political media and the 18th century crisis of credibility in Britain

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My talk today directly refers to my PhD project on the delimitations of political space and the redefinition of the body politic in 18th century Britain. As part of the early modern research group “Revolts as Communicative Events” in Konstanz, my dissertation especially deals with the significance of media in times of riots, revolts and revolutions.

Media – from performance to painting and print – are indispensable for the construction and perpetuation of power relations. In times of conflict, however, both political hierarchies and the media representing them are fundamentally contested.

On the one hand, political crises are marked by a decisive increase of both arcane and public communication, but on the other hand, quantities alone must not be mistaken for indicators of informational quality or even for signs of expanding political participation.

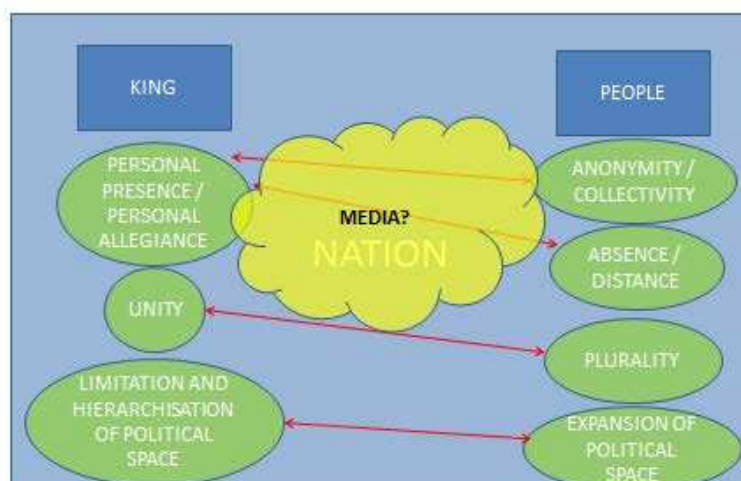
As the strong 18th century media criticism both in government circles and among opposition leaders reveals, genre as well as shifting channels of distribution are vital to a serious evaluation of crisis-related media and their impact on constitutional change.

The territory ruled by 18th century Britain, which consisted of several detached dominions, gives us a particularly striking example of the successes and failures of political communication on the verge of modernity.

From the Glorious Revolution to the Jacobite rebellions of the mid-18th century, representation of power was closely connected to highlighted spaces of political action, among them palaces, law courts and parliament. Such places served to show the unity of the nation and the legitimacy of royal government, which was furthermore invoked by a wide range of visual and written media as well as rituals and objects.

As the political validity of space heavily depended on coherent and sophisticated representations of the body politic, long-distance communication could indeed perpetuate the body through time, but not necessarily replace physical presence across space. A monarch's continued absence from the country which he claimed to command could easily question his legitimation and incite disappointment and rebellion. And if the monarch was in fact absent for a long time, representations had to be constantly revived and enforced. Shortly before the Treaty of Union between Scotland and England, the perspective that a common London based government would once for all cement the Scottish lack of royal presence was put forth as a powerful argument against a united kingdom.ⁱ Accordingly, the Jacobite rebellions from 1688 to 1746 were a fight for a monopoly on representation in borderlands of the British Isles, but also a fierce struggle for the credibility of political communication within an increasingly bureaucratic and impersonal administration. In 1714 and 1715, George I's Huguenot secretary Jean de Robethon reported to the King's ministers in Hanover that declarations had been published in the Pretender's name to assert his rights and sent them not only to his eager followers in Scotland but also to members of the royal household and the government in London.ⁱⁱ Besides, Jacobite leaders had issued seditious letters to the Anglican clergy and royal soldiers, and Hanoverian officials were very eager to discern whether these letters had really come from the exiled Stuart court or whether they were purely "invented"ⁱⁱⁱ. Apparently, the questions who published certain media and if such media were publicly perceived to be unique and reliable manifestations of their opponent's appeal mattered at least as much as content. Although James Francis Stuart was not physically present for most of the campaign, King George and his advisors knew that a well arranged medial presence meant winning half the battle.^{iv}

In the course of the following decades, however, British society – and above all colonial life in America – was shaken by an "atomization"^v of political agency, which was both fostered and followed by a reconstruction of the body of the nation and a shift in communicational devices. Legitimation for political participation was now more frequently drawn from a self-contained identity as a member of society – especially on a local level - rather than multiple relationships within the political body. Radical political writers as well as dissenting theologians claimed that space could now be politicised in its own right: if every man was an orator, every place could be an oratory.



Traditional headquarters of power, above all the London Parliament, were henceforth counterweighed and imitated by the formation of local assemblies, societies and clubs as well as the growing self-esteem of city magistrates.^{vi} Royal representation was still valued if it supported a plurality of opinions and liberty, but scorned if it demanded unification.

As a consequence, traditional media of governmental self-assertion began to take centre stage in contemporary media controversies.^{vii} Especially during the American Revolution, proclamations published by the king and colonial governors were popular objects of ridicule and subversive imitation.^{viii} In their place, new media of dialogue such as editions of reciprocal correspondence, parliamentary debates and petitions were advocated both by American patriots and opposition leaders within the British Isles.^{ix}

While the strength of Jacobitism in the first half of the century had been an international and loyal network of correspondents, oppositional movements of the later 18th century were now thriving to combine the credibility of personal letter writing with the broad appeal of printing. American patriots as well as agitators in the Scottish riots of 1779 or the Birmingham Riots of 1791 especially invigorated the use of hand-bills to further expand political space and engage all strata of society in their cause. The literary strategy developed in these widely spread prints and hand-written advertisements may well be termed *anonymous intimacy* as it addressed readers collectively yet charged with strong emotion and great awareness of the political rights and duties of each individual. In many instances, such hand-bills even forced the unsuspecting readers to take a political decision at all cost and openly threatened those who opposed action or wished to remain neutral with physical violence or a moral exclusion from society. During the American Revolution, this strategy undermined British and loyalist attempts to continue the American conflict as a *gentlemen's war* based on direct negotiation and well-defined hierarchies – a war in which the majority of the population would remain *addressees* of political writings rather than an independent *contributors*.

As young British officer Colonel Charles Stuart, who came to Boston shortly after the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775, reported in his letters to his father, the Earl of Bute, he and fellow supporters of the Crown treaded a complete extinction of political disinterestedness among the lower classes as this would inevitably lead to the “horrors of civil war” and much unnecessary bloodshed.^x In one letter, Charles Stuart did not only criticize the extensive use of distance media, but also noted that American patriots went to the churches right after Sunday service and tried to win over the assembled congregations. Because some rebel leaders were even allowed to speak from the pulpits, the people were - in Colonel Stuart's view - deceived and took oppositional opinionating for a calling from God.^{xi} The boundaries between different public spheres appeared to be blurred and the body politic seemed dangerously inversed. What might strike us as particularly royalist or Tory media scepticism, however, reflects a much broader and more fundamental 18th century debate on the value of information and the long-term effects of liberated political communication.

Despite pronounced Enlightenment media enthusiasm all across Europe, the frequent publications of intercepted letters and the abundance of anonymous newspaper reports likewise incited a general mistrust of mediated relations among all 18th century political parties and denominations, even though their responses differed.^{xii} From 1775 to 1783, British knowledge of American strategy and diplomatic undertakings did not only come from military intelligence but also from “rebel newspapers”. And George Washington as Commander in Chief of the Continental Army was very much aware that the deliberate spread of information and an emotional involvement of the entire population in politics of the day could not only generate trust and solidarity, but might also inspire treason. As a

consequence, George Washington made sure that plans for daring expeditions were kept secret as long as possible and frequently pleaded for an adaptation of public communication to seemingly more authoritarian and backward British models.^{xiii}

Another 18th century observer of the ambiguity of media was Scottish Catholic author George Hay (1729-1811) who remarked both the pacifying potential of an open debating culture in print and the dangers of a one-sided, unlimited dissemination of information produced by a biased, greedy and eventually non-patriotic press.

In his “memorial to the public: in behalf of the Roman Catholics of Edinburgh and Glasgow; containing, an account of the late riot against them on the second and following days of February, 1779”^{xiv}, Hay openly expressed his disappointment in the role which the local press had played in spreading the flame of anti-Catholic propaganda. As many newspapers had willingly published insulting private announcements and not weighed arguments carefully, Hay felt that radical Protestants had been encouraged to start an even more dubious media campaign.^{xv} Hay’s major point of press criticism was that most of the anti-Catholic articles were in fact printed anonymously and gave readers a false impression of their authors’ importance.^{xvi} Since most readers did not really know who the writers were and how many individuals contributed to the various publications, most people had in fact overestimated the number and rank of those involved. As it turned out later, the writers had only been – in Hay’s perception - “a set of (...) insignificant People.”^{xvii}

A major 18th century argument against low-threshold petitioning accordingly was that majorities on paper could hardly be proven to be real and sensible. Especially the impact of the American War of Independence and the French Revolution tightened the debate on the validity of democratic media such as protest rallies and written petitions. As a consequence, the question whether the signatures on Lord Gordon’s famous petition of 1780 sufficiently represented the “wishes of the nation”^{xviii} was a much debated issue. When the Attorney General at the King’s Bench asked witnesses at the bar why a larger assembly of people had been considered necessary for the handing over of the petition in the first place, the answer was [quote] “that it had been hinted, that it was a very easy matter for a person to sit down and write four or five hundred names to a petition, and therefore it would be necessary that they should appear to their subscriptions, and convince the world that they were not fictitious.” [unquote]

Similarly, William Burgh of York wrote a letter to the royal government in 1795, “dissociating [himself] and a majority of the householders of York from a petition to the House of Commons purporting to represent the view of the Corporation of York and praying for a speedy peace [with France].”¹ Mr. Burgh’s reason for denying the acceptation of the petition to the Commons was that two opposed factions in his home town were “now obtaining signatures to rival addresses to the king” and that some citizens were [quote] “enticing children and paupers to sign with the contents concealed”². [unquote]

A deeply rooted mistrust against democratic and increasingly anonymous ballots was thereby nourished among liberals and conservatives alike even though politicians on both sides conceded certain failures of the existing system.

In the aftermath of the American War of Independence, Britain developed refined rituals of active citizenship but also struck a refined balance between manuscripts, print and oral culture. Legitimate opposition had to heed specific rules of conduct and representation, which were now clearly distinguished from “ensigns of rebellion” and “mob violence”.

¹ (Burgh, 1795)

² (Burgh, 1795)

Indeed, Unitarian theologian Joseph Priestley was more tolerant than most of his contemporaries when he stated in this address to the citizens of Birmingham in 1792 that opinions uttered with reason and without violence should always be respected in a free society. But even though the French Revolution and the fear of a Jacobin overthrow posed another substantial threat in the 1790s, British political culture was well able to agree on the decency of conduct and the moderation of language as an important aspect of lawful opposition.^{xix} On the long run, political assemblies had to be announced in advance and be held publicly in order to distinguish them from conspiracies, and the educational function of media was stressed in order to improve citizenship and contain the rabble.

Both in Britain and the newly-founded United States, long-distance communication was once again backed up by physical presence and direct interaction by name.

It may not be denied that the 18th century certainly was a golden age of print, but this does not mean that print was ultimately taken more seriously than other media, or that manuscript culture and oral communication lost importance. Quite on the contrary, the complex processes media production, distribution and reception were profoundly reflected to integrate new forms of extra-governmental political action.^{xx} This self-reflexivity of the 18th century media world is probably a more lasting development than technical innovation, and it gave the “age of revolutions”^{xxi} an important intellectual basis.

ⁱ (Abercromby, 1706), p. 19: “So true it is, that Love to one’s Native Soil, is Ingrated in the very Nature of Man, and that our Hearts move as Naturally backwards to the Origin of our Blood, as the Waters when they return to the Sea. – Yet we were Miserable under all the above mentioned, our Natural and Native Sovereigns, and it could not be otherways: - They liv’d in England, and must needs Resign that Brighter and Richer Crown, or Comply with their wealthier Subjects, in the Oppression of the Poorer.”

ⁱⁱ HHStA Cal. Br. 24, Zeitungen aus London 1714-1715, fol. 14-15, St. James le 27 / 16 Nov.e 1714 : « Plusieurs Seigneurs de ce Royaume, et divers Membres du Conseil privé de S. M. recurent avant-hier par la poste de France une declaration ou manifeste du Pretendant imprimée en anglois, et datté à Plombieres du 28 d’aoust, dans laquelle le Pretendant proteste contre tout ce qui s’est fait à son prejudice, et en fait des reproches à la nation angloise, y adjoutant toutes les raisons capables de la disposer en sa faveur. Il s’y trouve un passage remarquable qui porte que ce P.ce estoit d’autant plus surpris de se voir traité de la sorte que dans les dernieres années de la Reyne sa sœur il avoit eu tout sujet d’estre assuré de son amitié pour luy. Je ne scay pas encore si on traittera cette piece comme authentiques, et si on y fera une reponce. Elle ne peut manquer de faire icy beaucoup de bien aux affaires du Roy, en remettant la nation en quelque terreur de la part du Pretendant, et en rendant suspects de Jacobitisme ceux qui travaillent avec tant de chaleur contre la cour dans les Elections. La cour de son costé redouble son attention à se les rendre favorables, et prend pour cela toutes les mesures necessaires à Londres, et dans dans les Provinces. Il y a aparence qu’elles seront suivies du succes désiré. »

ⁱⁱⁱ HHStA Cal. Br. 24, Zeitungen aus London 1714-1715, fol. 14-15, fol. 286, St. James le 31 / 20 Decembre 1715: « Les Rebelles (...) avoient fait imprimer à Perth 2 lettres, l’une est du duc d’Ormond au clergé anglican pour luy inspirer l’esprit de revolte, et l’autre du Pretendant aux officiers et aux soldats de nostre armée pour les faire deserter. Cette derniere lettre est contresignée par M.d Bullingbroke comme Secr. D’Estat. Ces 2 lettres sont dattées du commencement d’octobre. On ne scoit pas si elles sont genuines ou une invention de M.d Mar. »

^{iv} HHStA Cal. Br. 24, Zeitungen aus London 1714-1715, fol. 14-15, fol. 283 recto

^v www.historyofparliament.gov.uk

^{vi} (Priestley, 1972), p. 371: “The effect of this controversy upon the common people in Birmingham, who were made to believe that, some way or other, both the church and the state were in danger, and that my object was the utter destruction of both, was great and visible enough. On the walls of houses, &c., and especially where I usually went, were to be seen in large characters, MADAN FOR EVER, DAMN PRIESTLEY, NO PRESBYTERIANS, DAMN THE PRESBYTERIANS, &c. &c. At one time I was followed by a number of boys, who left their play, repeating what they had seen on the walls, and shouting out, *Damn Priestly, damn him, damn him for ever, for ever, for ever*, &c. &c. This was, no doubt, a lesson which they had been taught by their parents, and what these, I fear, had learned from their superiors.”

^{vii} Proclamations had seen a considerable rise in the rule of Queen Anne, where they were mainly used to recall and enforce parliamentary legislation. Proclamations were not the law as such but a measure to prove the monarch's vigilance and care for his country. In the case of Queen Anne's "Proclamation for the due observance of an act made in the last session of Parliament intituled (sic!) An Act to Prevent all Traiterous Correspondence with Her Majesties Enemies, London 1705", the proclamation was mainly intended to stress the transparency and legitimacy of the laws. In an important passage of the said act, Queen Anne stated: "We therefore taking the same into Our serious Consideration, to the end no person may pretend Ignorance of the said Law, and the Penalties, by Virtue thereof, to be Inflicted on such as shall Act contrary thereunto, have thought fit, by the Advice of Our Privy-Council, to Issue this Our Royal Proclamation."

^{viii} On June 14, 1775, American oppositional printer Benjamin Edes imitated General Gage's latest proclamation, which had been published the day before, and wittily mocked royal government in "another proclamation".

^{ix} (Hutchinson et al., 1774), (*Letters to the Ministry from Governor Bernard, General Gage, and Commodore Hood. And also memorials to the Lords of the Treasury, from the Commissioners of the Customs. With sundry letters and papers annexed to the said memorials.*, 1769)

^x Charles Stuart to Lord Bute, in: (Wortley and Rod, 1925)p. 195: "... this species of Mobbish war, - what Condé called "une guerre de pots de chamber"

^{xi} Charles Stuart to Lord Bute, Boston, July 24, 1775, in: (Wortley and Rod, 1925), p. 66: "Hancock, Warren and S. Adams had established the custom of haranguing the people from their churches, who, bigoted beyond the most inflamed Romans, thought that their seditious orations derived a degree of sanctity from the Pulpit whence they were usually delivered. The topic they chose was the massacre of the inhabitants of Boston by the Military, which happened, as you know, some years ago [in 1770], a topic which only served as a film to cover the most disloyal discourses; and so determined were they to enroll all degrees of men in their cause, that those incapable of being inflamed by argument, were won by threats of our barbarity, which in order to persuade them of, they established a procession wherein was represented their slaughtered Friends, attended with every horror that might make their blood boil in enmity to the Government."

^{xii} (Priestley, 1972), p. 370: "Other attempts, and some of them of a very infamous kind, were made to render my character odious. (...) This was represented in public prints, and the pamphlet containing the account was industriously circulated by some of the clergy in Birmingham and its neighbourhood. At first I neglected the idel story, as sufficiently contradicted by my writings and my whole conduct. Afterwards, however, at the instance of my friends, I published the clearest refutation of it. But even this did not appear to make any favourable impression on my enemies at Birmingham."

^{xiii} (Washington and Lengel, 2010), p. 184-185: In his famous admonitions to General Anthony Wayne, he noted: "Secrecy is so much more essential to these kind of enterprises than numbers, that I should not think it advisable to employ any other than the light troops. (...) As it is in the power of a single deserter to betray the design – defeat the project - & involve the party in difficulties (& danger, too much caution cannot be used to conceal the intended enterprise to the latest hour from all but the principal officers of your Corps and from the men till the moment of execution."

^{xiv} (Hay, 1779), p. 6

^{xv} (Hay, 1779), p. 7

^{xvi} (Hay, 1779), p. 8

^{xvii} (Hay, 1779), p. 10

^{xviii} (Gurney, 1781), p. 40: „Gentlemen, is it in evidence before you, that by rebellion the Scots carried their point; or that the indulgencies to Papists were not extended to Scotland, because the rabble had opposed their extensions? (...) Or can I be decently maintained, that parliament was so infamous, or so weak as to yield, to a wretched mob of vagabonds at Edinburgh, what it has since refused to the earnest prayers of an hundred thousand Protestants in London? No, Gentleman of the Jury, parliament was not, I hope, so abandoned. But the ministers knew that the Protestants in Scotland were, to a man, abhorrent of that law, and though they never held out resistance, if government should be disposed to cram it down their throats by force, yet such a violence to the united sentiments of the people, appeared to be a measure so obnoxious, so dangerous, and withal so unreasonable, that it was wisely and judiciously dropped to satisfy the general wishes of the nation, and not to avert the vengeance of those low incendiaries, whose misdeeds have rather been talked of than proved."

^{xix} (Priestley, 1972), p. 353: "friends, engaged in the same cause, though occupying different posts"

^{xx} (Priestley, 1972), p. 383: "My numerous correspondents in different countries of *Europe*, but more especially those who wrote to me in confidence in this country, will be as much affected by this catastrophe as myself. I might, no doubt, have destroyed those letters and other private papers myself. But I could not foresee that

men would act the part of brutes, without the least regard to law, to common equity, humanity, or decency; and that an event should happen at the close of the eighteenth century, of which it will not be easy to find a parallel for three centuries before. For the persecution of Christians by Heathens, and of Protestants by Papists, were generally conducted by some rule; and in matters of policy and religion some decent regard was still paid to a man's private concerns, in which the state had no interest. Not to feel such losses as these, and such usage as this, would be not to be a man."

^{xxi} (Priestley, 1972), p. 438

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