News Craze:
Public Sphere and the Eighteenth-Century Theatrical Depiction of Newspaper Culture

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Arthur Murphy introduced his 1758 play, The Upholsterer, or What News?—a play that parodied a spreading newspaper phenomenon (“frenzy”)—by stating his intent: “To shew this phrenzy in its genuine light, A modern newsmonger appears to night.”¹ He was happy to reveal the inspiration for his play: “Trick’d out from Addison’s accomplish’d page, Behold! th’ Upholsterer ascends the stage.”² The upholsterer in question, Quidnunc (Latin for “what news” or “what’s new”), is the protagonist of the comedy—a news-mad artisan who spends his time passionately debating current affairs while his family and business are neglected. Explaining the main focus of the play, the Critical Review quoted some of Joseph Addison’s own final remarks about “wrong-headed politicians who live more in the coffeehouse than in their own shops, and whose thoughts are so taken up with the affairs of the continent that they forget their customers.”³ And this was not a phenomenon perceived to be on the wane: the Critical Review concluded by remarking that “we apprehend that the folly which he means to ridicule, is even more epidemic at this juncture than it was when the Tatler was first published” nearly half a century earlier.⁴

Murphy was writing at a time of significant shifts in the interplay between news, politics, and the public. His politically charged play was composed during a period of pronounced anxiety over a war fought on a global scale with far-reaching consequences for empire and identity, a time when the meaning and significance of news was thrown into sharp relief. The appearance of Murphy’s short piece also came upon the cusp of wide-ranging cultural changes, with new entertainment, pastimes, and formats (and content) of newspapers playing center stage in the following two decades. The theater (and, to a lesser degree, the press) was central to the problematization and processing of evolving issues of identity and values. It was part of the public sphere representing

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a wide political and cultural spectrum in which royal control, political expression, and potential challenges to authority regularly clashed. Therefore, the theater of the time is “revelatory of a broader cultural politics, taking in issues of gender, class and national identity.” The Upholsterer was a precursor of what Daniel O’Quinn identifies as the similar representational tactics shared by theater and press and which became “both mutually constitutive and central to the stylization of social relation in this era [1770–90].” In a period of “intense integration of culture and society,” the autoethnographic qualities of the media become apparent: they were integral to the self-definition and introspection of individuals and society. And in the fascinating case of The Upholsterer, this was an introspective examination of the very medium itself. The play had a lasting effect, as argued convincingly by O’Quinn, which relied amongst other elements on updating the news references in later productions. Part of the effect of this continuous “updating” highlights what O’Quinn identifies as the autoethnographic qualities that go along with these plays.

Murphy’s condemnation of the Quidnunc character was not original, as he himself admitted in his opening lines; it formed part of a broader satirical attack directed at a type of newspaper consumer envisioned by some to be affecting the very fabric of the political life of the nation and of private individuals. This critique of the very early emergence of an avid, news-craving, politically engaged sector of the newspaper consumer market is a principal exemplar of contemporary narratives examining the development of open-door politics, vigorous debate, the inclusion of sectors beyond the landed (or other) elite, and the vital role of news and the press. This article will place the eighteenth-century critique as manifested in theatrical plays in the context of the twentieth-century theory of the public sphere, arguing that in many ways this Quidnunc-type reader fits well with Jürgen Habermas’s model. Furthermore, it will be argued that this phenomenon, a vanguard of the “political public sphere,” was considered by critics to be a dangerous development insofar as it produced a levelling effect that impacted the very structure and functioning of the political culture. The depiction of a Quidnunc culture will thus serve as a test case for a Habermasian public sphere.

Information, and the means of its dissemination, is central in eighteenth-century depiction and in twentieth-century theory. Murphy presupposed audience acquaintance with very specific current events, which are repeatedly referred to in his play in such a way as to “subtly hail the audience into a similar relation to the media as Quidnunc himself.” By highlighting to exaggeration the addiction to news, Murphy was able to differentiate between the “pathological” (Quidnunc) and the “normal” (audience) news-consuming culture. This means that he could criticize the addiction while continuing to uphold the importance of news consumption in a way that frames it as a key component in the creation of a “public sphere.” And yet, a serious criticism of this very culture, grounded in its levelling effect, is nonetheless on Murphy’s agenda.
Predating the full onset of new cultural trends based on the mixing of news and entertainment and the emergence of a press filled with “puff” and “personalities,” Murphy was already pointing to these developments in the late 1750s. His criticism will be discussed in the second part of this article and will further the discussion of the public sphere.

The “bourgeois public sphere” model, as formulated by Habermas, has been extremely influential, and broadly contested, in a wide range of disciplines. The historical debate has centered on the model’s validity as an ideal type, with critics also posing basic questions about the model’s very nature: whether there was a singular public sphere or rather several; who were its participants; where did it exist; when did it begin, mature, and decline; and was the perceived dichotomy between public and private a valid one? As for the historical perspective, Habermas identified the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century as an “ideal age,” a time when the political public sphere was at its peak. According to Habermas, several key factors converged to bring about this transformation—essentially, a periodical print sector free of prepublication censorship, coupled with a thriving coffeehouse culture that led to an open and inclusive political public sphere. The exact timing or even the very existence of such a “golden age” is not part of the present argument. For the purpose of this article it is assumed that during the late seventeenth and eighteenth century a non-linear process shaped a political public sphere, probably without ever reaching the stage of an “ideal type.” This is of lesser importance since no attempt will be made to analyze the ensuing structural transformations of this sphere. Rather, by examining the portrayal of the Quidnunc character, a re-evaluation of the concept of public sphere in its eighteenth-century context will be proposed. It will be argued that Habermas’s model remains a powerful tool for examining eighteenth-century British politics and culture, and that the portrayal of the Quidnunc trend represents early attempts by contemporaries to come to terms with and criticize a certain aspect of what in retrospect can be seen as an expression of a new “political public sphere.” The resulting picture fills a missing link in the theory: an eighteenth-century depiction of individuals whose very existence seems to exhibit the flowering of a Habermasian public sphere.

The analysis offered here follows Peter Lake and Steven Pincus’s aim of examining political communication (“the relaying of accounts of political process to different audiences”) as an essential aspect of the period. Whereas theirs was a long-term, all-encompassing history focused primarily on the “text” that was “unleashed into the public sphere,” this study follows the depiction of those who “received” the information—and specifically the most eager and involved sector of the public. Its approach is based on a twentieth-century elaboration of Habermas’s “literary public sphere,” the prerequisite of a “political public sphere,” which Jim McGuigan has re-described as a “cultural public sphere.” The latter consists in “the articulation of politics, public or personal, as a contested terrain through affective (aesthetic and emotional) modes of com-
munication.” It is important in this context to recall that the idea of the public sphere is first and foremost a concept of a virtual space, a metaphor for the “discursive realm of imagined collective” not limited by “actuality.” Key features of this integrative concept were print and news culture (along with the post office) as well as a certain leap of imagination by the participants, allowing for some form of solidarity among them. The eighteenth-century theatrical depiction of the news craze corresponded well with this basic view, with its participants playing a role in establishing and then acting within the new, imagined, non-traditional agora.

After the beginning of newspaper taxation in 1712, political corruption was an inescapable fact. In the following century the press was engaged in an ongoing struggle between independence and political/faction control. By the early 1770s the Morning Post (founded in 1772) had ushered in a new period of scandal sheets, innovatively combining parliamentary reporting, gossip, “exposés,” and advertisements and influencing the daily London press by simultaneously widening its scope of coverage and intensifying its focus on personalities, anecdotes, and puffs. These changes, which were not revolutionary so much as amplifications of continuous trends, were reflected and often ridiculed in the theatrical depiction of press culture. And they also marked an intensification of the always close relations between press and stage—both domains enjoying and magnifying personalities and puffing culture. Press and stage were “bound together by politics, for in their way the theaters were quite as political as the newspapers.” But in a certain respect, political corruption could have acted as a draw, not a drawback, to an aspiring Quidnunc, adding a further layer of meaning to decode and ensuring the continuous and highly engaging back-and-forth wrangling in the newspapers. The last quarter of the century may have been a high mark for such content, but Quidnuncs throughout most of the period could have relied upon a steady supply of such intrigue and fodder for debate.

Though much has changed since John Fleming’s 1973 call for historians to “take literature seriously,” literature has remained a somewhat under-used source for historians. Similarly, while the value of newspapers for theater research is well documented, with eighteenth-century newspapers providing reliable information about theatrical productions in the form of advertisements and offering a rich commentary on plays in various theater columns, the converse relationship awaits examination. The theater provided a “living,” self-conscious cultural source for the study of the press, as it offered reflections on and not merely of the press in society. The value of the theater as a source of press history derives also from certain parallels between the two domains: by their nature, both are sensitive to current events and trends in an attempt to be relevant to their audience’s lives and historically, both were relatively open institutions in which various sectors of society intermingled regularly.

Nor should the comic nature of many of the plays considered here dimin-
ish their value as an historical source. Satirical writing relies generally on im-
mediately identifiable and fairly accurate portrayals of contemporary life and
on well-established tropes representing widely shared perceptions of the au-
dience’s world. The theatrical play, whether comic or not, thus represents
more than the author’s idiosyncratic attitudes and views—it hints at pervasive
worldviews, particularly when considering social and political relations within
society. But while the objects of satirical depiction have to be more or less com-
monly shared and easily recognizable to be effective, the satirical and artistic
elements can pose a challenge for the historian: the ironic depiction of one char-
acter may well be a theatrical method of parodying another character and not
just a simple reflection of perceived phenomena. A close critical reading and
various examples of similar depictions is thus important.

The motivations for such satirical attacks stand to shed further light on their
objective. The authors discussed here, whether writing in periodical or theatri-
cal form, did not hesitate to condemn one of their most prized consumers, the
dedicated newspaper reader. Considering the close relations between the stage
and the print shop and the fact that most authors discussed here wrote both
plays and periodicals, this choice can seem all the more surprising.

Political agendas may seem to provide a natural explanation for the critique
articulated by such satirists as Addison, Henry Fielding, and Murphy. Addison,
the influential originator of the Quidnunc character, was the product of Whig
patronage networks, a member of the Kit-Cat Club, an inconspicuous MP and
a failed Secretary of State (1717) who was ousted by a different Whig faction.
Addison was promoting a social plan for the middling sorts based on the “he-
egemony of a network of powerful men [that was] composed of a definable set
of interests, political social, intellectual, which dominated the London scene
(though not the government) in the reign of Queen Anne.”

Despite this agenda, however, Addison’s exact views and his social leaning
(middling sorts or elite) are still a matter of debate. And more importantly,
the socio-political inclinations of the writers discussed here appears in general
to be far less consequential when we take into account the fact that a certain
denunciation of what can be seen as a Habermasian public sphere was, as Brian
Cowan has argued, an issue that united the political ideological spectrum, at
least in the early part of the century. Fielding, another major author whose
writing for the theater featured a Quidnunc-like protagonist, made no clear
statements about his belief system or political stance. His diverse and impor-
tant writings are a somewhat uneven and treacherous ground on which to base
an analysis of his views, due to their high variability. Like many authors, Field-
ing was driven primarily by the need to earn his keep. His political identity, if
any, was probably that of an old-style Whig, believing in Lockean liberty and
the Protestant church. According to James Downie, it was the Whig govern-
ments that regularly shifted ground while Fielding actually stuck to the same
views, leading him to change his attitudes towards successive governments.
As for Murphy, judging from his Pitt-opposing political newspaper, The Test, he belonged to the Foxite Whig part of the political spectrum. Yet Murphy’s next involvement in political newspapers was with the Bute-leaning Auditor, a Tory-supporting publication, suggesting once again the nonpolitical nature of the general condemnation of the perceived Quidnunc phenomenon: it was neither based in party politics nor even ideologically motivated. The Quidnunc culture was anathema to these authors irrespective of such alliances. This helps to explain their attacks on such “valued” putative customers: their satire manifested a real, deep-seated concern. Though the language of class is probably inappropriate for this period (at least for its beginning), the spreading of political consciousness, information, and debate was a source of fear because it created, as discussed in greater detail below, a levelling effect. Political awareness was perceived to reach the lower sectors of the middling sorts (or the upper echelons of the lower orders) and this development was brought to attention and ridiculed on stage and in print as a form of warning by reforming Whigs and pen-for-hire Tories alike.

THE QUIDNUNC PHENOMENON

Only 15 years after the final lapsing, in 1695, of the Licensing Act, which had marked the effective end of prepublication censorship, did the newspaper market seem to engender a news-addicted, politically obsessed sector within its readership. For the upholsterer Quidnunc, the protagonist of Murphy’s satire of the Quidnunc phenomenon, sleep was delayed until the Gazette had arrived, and time passed by reading the London Evening Post. This kind of eagerness for news was central to the portrayal of the Quidnunc-type individual, whose initial characterization was created by Addison in the Tatler. Addison’s protagonist, also named Quidnunc, represented a distinctly British coffeehouse “Epidemic Ill,” based largely on the “reading of News-Papers,” which created a community and was said to lead to a “Loss” of “Intellects” and to acute “dullness.” Referencing Miguel de Cervantes’s Don Quixote (1605, 1615; first volume translated to English 1612 and the second in 1620), Addison warned that newspapers in Britain were as dangerous as chivalry in Spain, and that they could eventually lead the “weak Heads in England” to “Bedlam.”

In a number of issues, Addison and Sir Richard Steele’s widely popular and highly influential daily Tatler savagely ridiculed this new type of newspaper reader, laying the foundations for the depiction of the Quidnunc character throughout the century and beyond. The two mainstays of this Quidnunc culture were the information-providing newspaper and public spaces (coffeehouses, shops, and the street itself), where the Quidnuncs could debate the burning issues of the moment and argue about their proposed schemes to resolve state affairs.

On these two pillars a community of coffeehouse/street politicians was
emerging, at least in the portrayal of Addison, Fielding, Murphy, and others. But these Quidnunc-type characters were clearly not portrayed as what may now be described, with historical hindsight, as “bourgeoisie.” This term would become central to the critique of Habermas’s model, with the English translation using “bourgeois” to characterize the political public sphere of the early eighteenth century. But the term “bürgerlich,” as Thomas Burger, Habermas’s English translator, explains, could also have been rendered as “civil,” and the translator’s decision, as Michael McKeon convincingly points out, was instrumental in the understanding of the concept in the English-speaking world. According to McKeon, the term “bourgeois” is better suited to the nineteenth-century discussion (and in particular to Habermas’s main interest in the “structural transformation”) than to the contexts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with respect to which it is almost impossible to speak of such a self-conscious class. In the context of the eighteenth century, a more accurate term would indeed be the “civil political public sphere,” a description that would also weaken some of the criticism born of the historical analysis. This alternative description fits well with the Quidnunc character as it was depicted during the eighteenth century, when there was as yet no such self-aware, pronounced class identity. This Quidnunc world was populated by a spectrum of middling sorts but first and foremost by members of the lower end, which included artisans, shopkeepers, and traditional professions, while attracting the condemnation of those in the upper reaches of this loose grouping.

Though it is true that newspapers underwent a variety of changes over the course of the century and that their political content was especially transformed due to the shifting coverage of Parliament, it is important to note that political content did filter through even before the open coverage of Parliament. The particular nature of the content changed over time, shaped by the continuous format changes within the press (due partly to transport, taxation, and journalistic and commercial modifications and innovations). And yet, for Quidnuncs, gossip, propaganda, and especially foreign intelligence were a steady source throughout. The theater (as well as the playwrights) was similarly sensitive to current political issues, and thus Quidnuncs depicted on stage were clearly of their time, while also displaying the more consistent traits of an enduring character created and developed over the century.

The centrality of political content by Addison’s time can be gleaned by examining the newspapers’ own self-presentation. Their political impact was well understood, and feared, by contemporaries. The “Kick and Cuff with Tutchin, De Foe and the rest of the Scandalous Clubb,” as Charles Leslie reminded his readers in his Rehearsal, was a self-aware political-ideological propaganda, and as such provided the perfect backdrop to Addison’s initial Quidnunc incarnation. Fielding created the first major reincarnation of the Quidnunc character in Rape upon Rape (1730) in a period in which two journals, the Gentleman’s Maga-
zine and its rival, the London Magazine, ran partial delayed reports from Parliament (starting in early 1732). After the 1738 crackdown by Parliament, the London Magazine reported on the proceedings of a club of young gentlemen, and the Gentlemen's Magazine famously included reports by Captain Gulliver's grandson about debates in the Senate of Lilliput. Parliamentary reports were withheld until the end of the session, and were chronologically mixed and highly unreliable.36 Benjamin B. Hoover assesses the reports thus: "Though always, in a measure, imaginative, they had usually some basis in fact, and were taken by the public as 'reports,' not as dramatic diversions."37 One can easily envision the suitability of such content to a Quidnunc culture, transgressing the loose boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. That said, this was clearly highly untimely content and thus could provide only a framework for the Quidnuncs' passion, which was reliant on fast-paced, dynamic intelligence. This, at least until the late 1760s, was supplied partly through foreign news.

Indeed, for a long time, political debate in the press was conducted largely over world news. Jeremy Black, who has repeatedly argued that the influence of the press occurred through foreign intelligence, points out, for instance, that in the 1720s and 1730s, campaigns against the Walpole administration were conducted in the press (unsuccessfully) over international issues. Thus, an important part of the newspapers' shaping of political consciousness occurred through their foreign news reports.38 Moving to the 1740s and mid-century politics, Bob Harris's careful analysis of the role of newspapers in bridging open- and closed-door politics, ideology, commerce, and the spheres of the tavern, war, Parliament, and the tradesman's club once again shows the centrality of foreign intelligence to this process. In this sense, attempts by Parliament to suppress (or even control) the political debate in the press largely failed.39

So, a reduced supply of "purely political" items such as parliamentary coverage did not mean that the newspapers were not a fertile ground for Quidnuncs. And indeed, it is "the Affairs of the World" that preoccupy the character of Postscript in The Generous Husband (1711); twenty years later, Dabble hopes for a new understanding based on the fresh "Dutch mail" in Fielding's Rape upon Rape; and Murphy's Quidnunc is repeatedly engaged in foreign affairs. When Murphy's Quidnunc finally meets his son who has returned from ten years in the West Indies (and who will prove to be his and his daughter's savior), Quidnunc is interested only in fresh intelligence: "I'm glad to see thee, Jack, I am indeed—pray now—mayhap, I say, you can tell what the Spaniards are doing in the bay of Honduras?"40 As O'Quinn argues, it was foreign affairs that took center stage in Murphy’s depiction of news and politics.41

But it was not only foreign news, even before the opening of parliamentary reporting, that was central to a Quidnunc’s reading of the press. At the time of Murphy’s Upholsterer, some 9 percent of the indexed content of two central London publications, by a conservative estimate, was distinctly political, suggesting the ongoing political coverage in the press. By 1785, after the opening of Parliament
to the press, more than 20 percent of indexed items were classified as political in nature, and a Quidnunc would have probably counted countless other items as political, including foreign intelligence, war news, and many other items relating to the rich political tapestry depicted in the press. Still, the hike in the number of political items (from 9 percent in 1758 to nearly 20 percent by 1775) indicates the importance that parliamentary reporting had come to assume in the press.42

Though most powerfully felt in London, the increasingly influential political type of discussion was far from restricted to the metropolis.43 For instance, Murphy hinted that a Quidnunc culture was evident in the countryside as well, where it was stripped to its essentials: a variety of papers, “several” coffee-houses, and a community of “politicians”—“Swarms of ’em, there’s the curate, and the justice of the quorum, and an exciseman, and a yellow admiral, and an attorney, and—”.44 The provincial thirst for news was also depicted in William Thomas Moncrieff’s All at Coventry (1816), in which the Quidnunc-like Bramble is mocked by his servant for his zealous chase after news and for the subordination of his daily routine to the arrival of the metropolitan papers and especially The Times.45 By the end of the Napoleonic Wars, internal communications in Britain had allowed for the wide circulation of newspapers, thereby enabling the reliance of a character like Bramble on the London papers. But even earlier, already in the eighteenth century, developments in the postal and transport systems (for example, an upturn in the construction of turnpikes in the 1750s and 1770s) made it possible for provincial urban dwellers to consume London titles (along with local ones) on a regular basis.46 The arrival of the London Gazette in Joseph Reed’s Somerset set adaptation of Tom Jones (by the 1760s, newspaper circulation was well provided for by the turnpike system) had a similar significant effect. Such days were “Gazette days” and led, as in the case of Moncrieff’s Bramble, to changes in the household patterns, this time at the insistence of the lady of the house.47 And the aptly named newspaper-mad Sir Gregory Gazette is another example of the onstage depiction of the burgeoning English-provincial Quidnunc world.48 For Habermas, “the public sphere of civil society stood or fell with the principle of universal access.”49 It is important to note, in light of Habermas’s emphasis on this “principle,” that for long stretches of the eighteenth century, newspapers’ public spaces (such as coffeehouses) and even the theater itself were indeed accessible to a very significant part of the population, at least notionally. And more importantly still for the purposes of the present discussion, the press was perceived and depicted on stage by contemporaries as accessible to a worrying degree.

The news craze was at the heart of the characterization of Politicks, the Addison-inspired protagonist of Fielding’s Rape upon Rape (later reworked as The Coffeehouse Politician), who was in turn the ancestor of and likely inspiration for Murphy’s Quidnunc.50 The unrelenting, feverish preoccupation with the news is ridiculed in Politicks’s conversation with another “coffeehouse politician,” the breathless Dabble:
Dabble.

I have not slept one wink for reflecting on what you told me last Night; perhaps this Dutch Mail may give some Insight into those Affairs. But what says the Lying Post?

Politicks.

I have had no time to read it yet, I wish you would. I have only read The London Journal, the Country Journal, the Weekly Journal, Applebee’s Journal, the British Journal, the British Gazeteer, the Morning Post, the Coffee-House Morning Post, the Daily Post, the Daily Post-Boy, the Daily Journal, the Daily Courant, the Gazette, the Evening Post, the Whitehall Evening Post, the London Evening Post, and the St. James’s Evening Post. So, if you please begin the Lying Post.51

So consumed is Politicks by reading and re-reading newspapers and discussing them with his fellow fanatics that he loses track of his personal life to the point of being berated (by Justice Worthy): “What an Enthusiasm must it have arrived to, when it could make him forget the Loss of his only Daughter!”52 Yet Politicks’s priorities are clear: “My Daughter gone! that is some allay to my happiness, I confess: but the Loss of twenty Daughters would not balance the Recovery of the Dauphin.”53

This Quidnunc culture tallies closely not only with the Habermasian model but also with the historical examination of various contemporary trends, notably Julie Stone Peters’s analysis of the quest for “novelty” in the 1690s, which was mixed with anxiety and was reflected in an intense debate in the theater. News, print, and newspapers created a “self-generating curiosity for news,” which increased relentlessly, leading consumers to wonder about the very newness of news. In Peters’s analysis, the news broadened people’s worlds, painting a more complex and colorful picture, which tied in with the democratization of consumption as well as of production.54 Established on foundations laid down in the 1690s, the trend of news-obsessed, politically driven individuals was revived and greatly amplified in the eighteenth century, whereupon it almost immediately got caught in the crosshairs of critics. The encroachment of news upon all aspects of life was depicted in Richard Cumberland’s 1794 The Box-Lobby Challenge. At such a volatile moment in time, with the opposition press doing better than expected though still dwarfed by Prime Minister William Pitt’s press cohorts, becoming engulfed by news might seem more probable than not.55 In the play, however, the news fanatic Jack Crotchet, who has just sat down with a newspaper, is chastised with a flash of personal “intelligence,” hinting again at the disengagement from one’s surroundings that resulted from compulsive interest in the political public sphere:

Lindamira.

Do you not hear me? Do you not regard me? What is this feign’d insensibility? Cool, deliberate villain, quit this nonsense, and attend to me.
[Snatches the paper.]

Jack Crotchet.

Come, come, Lindamira, give me the paper; I was in the midst of a very interesting paragraph.

Linda.

I’ll give you news, if that is what you thirst for, news to strike you dumb—you are ruin’d, and by me.56

During the eighteenth century, a broader public was depicted on stage as contributing to the political process by proposing schemes on issues of national and political significance. Lake and Pincus show that the ruling elite’s practice of public pitches became an integral part of the political process in the “post-Reformation public sphere.”57 Quidnuncs, then, were not only consuming news, they were participating in political life (sometimes only in their own minds) by making proposals aimed at solving burning national issues. In the case of Murphy’s character Razor (the barber), Quidnunc’s fellow street politician, a burning desire to explain his solution to the budgetary problems (which “came into my head all of a sudden”) leads him to leave “a gentleman half shaved” in favor of informing his friend of his scheme.58 A certain participatory element, even if only virtual, is evident in the depiction of the Quidnunc society, well in line with Habermas’s expectations of the political public sphere.

The emergence and maintenance of a political public sphere required a high level of interest in news (and a vehicle for its efficient distribution, i.e., the newspaper). And while it may seem obvious in hindsight, the process of establishing this interest and sustaining it on a regular basis at the end of the seventeenth century and during the eighteenth century should not be taken for granted. As James Carey has observed, “because we are a news-saturated people, it may seem strange to argue that the desire to know, understand and experience the world by getting news or reports about it is really a rather strange appetite.”59

The depiction of the Quidnunc culture offers another window onto this non-obvious process, in which parts of society developed the taste for news so critical to the development of the public sphere. This fervor for news is manifest in numerous plays—for example, David Garrick’s The Gamesters (1757), where a character declares his “great appetite for news,” requesting a “slice” of any new story. He receives “a meal” of “extraordinary fine news, in black and white, from terra incognita.”60 This is but one theatrical manifestation of what John Hunter highlighted as a late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century “preoccupation with novelty,” which developed “into pure ephemeral silliness” in which “events and rumors of the street” were reinserted through print. It was a period when the “present moment” became part both of “casual conversation” and “serious discourse.”61

The extent of the mania for newspapers is satirized in Politicks’s advice to his daughter, Hilaret:
Pol.icks

A News-Paper would be a more profitable Entertainment for you than a Ro-

mance. You would find more in one half Sheet, than in the grand Cyrus.

Hilaret

More Lies very probably—You know I do read the Home Paragraphs in the

Whitehall Evening Post: and that’s the best of them.

Pol.

If you would be informed in these Matters, you must read all that come out:

about forty every Day, and some Days fifty: and of a Saturday about fourscore.

Would you continue in such a Course but one Twelvemonth, I do not question

but you might know as much of Politicks as—any Man that comes to our Coffee-

house. And I had rather see you a Politician, than a Woman of Quality.62

Though Politicks acknowledges the unreliable nature of the press, he believes

that such extensive reading of the news can help him get to the bottom of

things. And his belief in women’s ability to join the ranks of the Quidnuncs is

clear; he prefers this course for his daughter even at the risk of the loss of her

social status as a “woman of quality.”63

In this he was not alone. The Quidnunc culture, and therefore this representa-

tion of a Habermasian public sphere, though fundamentally male-oriented,

did include women—at least as targets for satirical criticism. In his 1728 com-

dedy The Craftsman, John Mottley portrayed the country gentleman as lacking

all entertainment but for his reading (“twice or thrice over every Week”) of the

eponymous publication, while his daughter is an even more dedicated con-

sumer, able to “say you [The Craftsman] by rote.”64

In the 1760s and 1770s, a radical change in women’s standing, described

by Paul Langford as a “full-blown revolution,”65 placed them at the forefront

of evolving metropolitan entertainment, consumerism, and fashion. Some his-

torians argue that the role of women in society underwent rapid transforma-

tions, resulting in a certain gender anxiety,66 while others highlight continuity

and women’s ability to negotiate their place in public society through changing

circumstances.67 Either way, certain periods of crisis are identifiable. A reflec-

tion of this phenomenon can be seen in the emergence of female Quidnuncs

on stage. Mrs. Winfred in Elizabeth Griffith’s The School for Rakes is a politi-

cally skillful reader with a craving for fresh newspapers and debate: “I must beg,

Sir William, that you will order all the news-papers, and magazines, to be sent

here, also. My mental faculties are quite at a stand—I have not had the least

political information, these four days.”68 Similarly, the heroine of Reed’s oper-

atic adaptation of Fielding’s Tom Jones, Mrs. Western, is an archetypal female

Quidnunc, totally consumed by her desire for news: it influences her language,

her attention span, and the very way she thinks.69

Likewise, the opening scene of Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s The Critic (1779)

showed the Dangles reading the newspapers (at times aloud) while breakfasting.
Sheridan, later “the manager of the press for the Rockingham Whigs,” was perfectly placed to (self-)ridicule the impact of newspapers on public consciousness, political or otherwise. At a time when politics and gossip, the arts, and current affairs were regularly juxtaposed in a new fashion on the pages of the daily London press, the Dangles’ two distinct ways of consuming news served to highlight a critique of the new press culture with its manipulative personality-angled reporting. Celebrity was taking off, in both the theatrical and the political arenas, fuelled by puffing and anecdotes in the papers. In the play, it is clear that Mrs. Dangle is the serious reader. Whereas Mr. Dangle skims through the paper (a recurring theme in several other plays) and focuses on news of the theater, she reads its content closely and focuses on the “important” news, rebuffing her husband’s condemnation of her interests and criticizing his own pursuits: “No, no; you will never read any thing that’s worth listening to—you hate to hear about your country; . . . you never will read any thing to entertain one [politics and current affairs].” The role reversal here is notable and befits satirical methods. In a period when women were redefining their role in the public/political/sociability realms, the depiction of the female protagonist as straightforwardly politically engaged (against the backdrop of the male theatrical Quidnunc) serves to highlight the role of women in social politics at the time: occupying a growing place in the new entertainment and sociability options, which possessed a distinctly political dimension. This fits well with Gillian Russell’s reading of the Habermasian public sphere as highlighting “domiciliary sociability,” which “always had an intrinsic political meaning because it was a potential source of power and influence and, most significantly, knowledge.” Furthermore, of importance in the context of this article is the fundamental role of the press (and the theater) in this emergence of social politics—including but not restricted to its gendered aspects in the 1760s and 1770s. The press, as analyzed by Russell, both shaped responses to change and functioned as a crucial link in enabling it by “broadcasting” the various meeting points between different components and transformations within the public sphere. Newspapers were part of this world while also a critical reflexive mirror through which countless participants tried to form and criticize changes in the meeting point between private and public Georgian culture, society life, and politics.

This commonly repeated breakfast scene supports a neglected aspect of Habermas’s revised understanding of the public sphere, namely the value it places on “fleeting moments during the day, in small private circles” wherein media plays its role in the formation of public opinion and people “take affirmative or negative positions.” Furthermore, contemporary research points to the value of casual political conversation and argumentation in democratic culture. This type of crossover communication, between the public and the private realms, was portrayed on stage as central to the Quidnunc’s behavior. In *The Upholsterer*, Quidnunc communicates with his brother and children only in the language of newspapers, devoid of personal emotional expression. He loses his sense of perspective, haranguing his brother in the dead of night with
“fresh intelligence” in yet another example of Quidnunc’s (and Razor’s) social world “spiralling out of control due to their inability to assess and enact the correct usage of signs.” Even his moral compass is guided by his thirst for news, leading him to view the robbing of the post rider in the harshest terms: “Ay, what rob a mail, and stop all the news,—a vile fellow away with him.—a man capable of robbing a mail, wou’d not scruple to rob a church.” As in many aforementioned scenes, it is precisely in this interpersonal space, where friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and family members communicate, that the political, the gossipy, the personal, the national, and the familial intermingle. The result of this combination was the target for eighteenth-century satirists.

The dichotomous view of the private and public spheres is both historically and theoretically problematic. From Alexis de Tocqueville (1835) via John Dewey (1927) to twenty-first-century analysis, the slippage between political and everyday conversation has been reiterated and valued as fundamental to political culture. The mixture of public/political and private/personal topics within “ordinary political conversation” forms another aspect of the welding of the public and the private. This type of conversation commonly takes place in what are described as private spaces—among family and friends and at home—further blurring the distinction between the private and the public. And although the public/private distinction is indeed a problematic aspect of Habermas’s model, even in his original analysis the public sphere is where “private people come together as a public.” It is therefore the site of “publicity in privacy,” rather than one half of a simple dichotomy.

And indeed, the eighteenth-century evidence from the theater shows a rich, graded, and above all mixed spectrum between the private and the public in the depiction of the Quidnunc culture, in keeping with a careful reading of Habermas’s view. In effect, the Quidnunc’s private sphere becomes so entangled with his participation in the public sphere that the two spheres become hard to distinguish. This absence of clear boundaries was a central aspect of the eighteenth-century critique. Interpersonal relations that do not form part of a Quidnunc’s news circle, as well as personal financial matters, evaporate. Emotions are framed by and expressed through the language of news and politics, even at critical personal junctures. Postscript, half-heartedly wooing Florida in The Generous Husband (1711), converses in newspaper lingo as he begs her to “but once lay aside these grave things, call’d books and listen to the Affairs of the World.” Florida, meanwhile, describes him in no uncertain terms: “This Thing [Postscript] is a walking News-paper: his Head is the very Emblem of the dirty Houses he frequents, full of foul Pipes, News, and Coffee—Foh, methinks I smell him hither; he stinks of Tabacco like an old Gazette.”

Newspapers were portrayed on stage against almost every conceivable backdrop—read and discussed in private quarters and in the communal areas, in the dining rooms and drawing rooms, in the servants’ quarters and service areas, and in public spaces (e.g., a public house, an inn, a coffeehouse). As
early as a year after the lapsing of the press Licensing Act, an unknown writer opened an act with a characterization of his protagonists based on their consumption of news: “[Curtain drawn, discovers Swash and Sharper at Cribbidge; four Bailiffs and Nich. Froth sitting by Smoaking and Drinking. News Papers on the Table].”

Half a century later, the coffeehouse was a systematic, regulated, almost ritualistic element of Quidnunc culture, as is evident in the explanation offered by Murphy’s Quidnunc as to why he could not appear before the bankruptcy commissioners the following day: “That may be, Sir, but I can’t go to-morrow, and so I shall send ’em word—I am to be to-morrow at Slaughter’s coffee-house with a private committee about business of great consequence to the affairs of Europe.” Confined public spaces, mainly coffeehouse, are essential in Habermas’s model, on par with the newspaper, in the early stages of the development of the political public sphere. Their prominence in the news and political culture of the eighteenth century was regularly depicted on stage, and was central to the critique of the Quidnunc’s habits.

Cowan maintains that it was social and moral anxieties and Whig values that led writers like Addison and Steele to attempt to reform such institutions as the coffeehouse in the early part of the eighteenth century. Coffeehouse sociability and debate, which included a theatrical element, created a coffeehouse culture that was deemed to affect many people beyond those present. But as the century progressed, transformations in the social fabric of the coffeehouse led, according to John Barrell, to changes in its codes of conduct and in the kind of freedom of speech it enabled. Whereas earlier in the eighteenth century the coffeehouse had provided a public space in which people could conduct private communication, thus allowing some extent of free political interaction, the emergence of tradesmen in such surroundings transformed the coffeehouses’ polite codes of conduct and slowly drove the “public men” to new public spaces. This transformation in the nature of the coffeehouse was a big part of what Fielding and Murphy (and others) were censuring. But it did not exhaust their critique of Quidnunc culture. In Murphy’s depiction it was not only the coffeehouse-based public sphere that was contaminated by the encroachment of new social groups but the very lives of its participants and, more importantly, the nation’s political life. In a way, the “coffeehouse politician” had overtaken that institution and then moved into the street, spreading a treacherous Quidnunc culture.

An extension of the coffeehouse culture, the more regulated club was similarly portrayed on stage: “I’ll take a turn in the Park, and then to the Cocoa-tree, to hear the news of the day, and peruse the advertisements.—I have a world of business on my hands, that’s certain.” In The Adventures of a Night (1783), heavily influenced by Rape upon Rape, Harriet ridicules her father who is hurrying to his club, stating that one of the examples men set for women is of “politicians [in the clubs] deciding upon the interests of Europe, with no more knowledge of it than they glean from a newspaper.” And though clubs were, at that time,
partially replacing the coffeehouse as a political locale, coffeehouses nonetheless remained important. In the emerging urban center of Liverpool, the merchant Charles Goore depicted in a letter to the MP Sir William Meredith “the coffee houses” that “are now crowded waiting to hear the resolves of parliament relative to American affairs.” 90 It seems that the new impetus of parliamentary reporting coupled with the “American affairs” assured the continuation of the successful combination of newspaper and coffeehouse. This is particularly fitting, since it was this combination that was so fundamental to the press in the 1770s—and which further reflects the matrix that Murphy highlighted during the Seven Years’ War: an anxiety surrounding empire, national identity, and the merchant class. As O’Quinn argues persuasively, one of the keys to Murphy’s play lies in the combination of information (in its highly unreliable jumbled form as represented in the newspapers), class (Quidnuncs representing the merchant class), and imperial crisis. The picture he paints includes, on the one hand, a growing demand for information and, on the other, a growing reliance of the nation on the merchant class and on economic relations with the colonies—and all this, heightened in a time of war: “The papers’ tendency to disperse and jumble information, their lack of internal organization and coherence, and above all their unreliability offer a compelling figure for the dissolution of national identity in the face of economic and political forces of imperial expansion.” 91

These public locations were centers for the communal manifestation of the news craze. The conversation that occurred in such places is widely recognized as an important part of the mediation between newspapers, political agenda, and public opinion. 92 Coffeehouse society had its own customs and regulations, and its meetings were not haphazard but well-coordinated events. This centrality of animated debate adds another perspective to the “rational” element of the Habermasian public sphere, which is a target of many critics. Habermas’s use of the word “rational” is often misunderstood as denoting a form of disinterested or “cold” discussion. 93 But Habermas sees all modern individuals as inevitable participants in a rational discourse insofar as he regards all “communicative acts” as rational by definition. 94 Rational debate, by extension, should be understood as a condition in which social status determines neither participation nor the authority of a given argument. 95 It is this equalizing quality, indeed, that constituted the main concern of contemporaries regarding Quidnunc culture, with its vigorous and open debate that saw upholsterers and barbers proposing solutions to national issues. This culture also indicates a further dimension of “the cut and thrust of argument,” which in the early eighteenth century became central for some as a “means to discover truth.” 96

LEVELLING EFFECT

A news-hungry, newspaper-consuming public was portrayed on stage as a phenomenon to be reflected upon. It was perceived, in line with the Haberma-
sian model, to be playing a part in a new way of forming the political will. The new social group of Quidnuncs in a sense epitomized the type of politically engaged person envisioned by Habermas, heralding a new political public sphere. Yet eighteenth-century observers were also wary of the dangers and challenges posed by a society of “street politicians.” Their anxieties about the effects of a Quidnunc culture, which in effect manifested their own place within the “political public sphere,” were expressed in the theater, which became “a site not only for modelling but also for the regulating of social practice.” When she is done ridiculing Murphy’s Quidnunc for his overzealous concentration on newspapers and politics, his daughter’s servant, Termagant, picks up the paper herself. She is clearly depicted as a savvy newspaper reader, educated in deciphering content and style. Most significantly, Termagant’s reading of the newspaper highlights its levelling effect, blurring distinctions between readers and news subjects, high and low, the moral and the corrupt:

\[
\text{takes the news-paper and reads.}\ldots \text{dances and sings}
\]

but such \textit{trumpery} as the news is, with kings, and cheesemongers, and bishops, and \textit{highwaymen}, and ladies prayer-books, and lap-dogs, and the \textit{domodary} and \textit{camomile}, and ambassadors, and haircutters, all \textit{higgledy piggledy} together—As I hope for \textit{marcy} I’ll never read another paper—and I wishes old \textit{Quidnunc} would do the same—.

The eighteenth-century newspaper was indeed a poorly organized jumble of information and misinformation, opinion, and advertisements. Within its pages, countless subjects, content types, authors, and topics intermixed, creating a smorgasbord into which certain readers were eager to delve. Even on the sole occasion when a piece of information in the papers is actually vitally important to Murphy’s Quidnunc (his declaration of bankruptcy is reported), he scurries on to other news, all the while bemoaning the waste of precious newspaper space, an act indicative of his priorities. Termagant’s analysis of newspaper culture and its levelling effect is then reconfirmed in Quidnunc’s sudden realization that the bankruptcy notice places his name side by side with those of famous people and with tales of great events. With this juxtaposition, enacted before a readership that he imagines to be international, Quidnunc’s newspaper world is reversed—instead of reading about the Pope, the Pope could now read about him:

\[
\text{Oh! Heavens!—I’m quite out of breath,—a jade, to keep my news from me,—what does it say? what does it say? what does it say?}
\]

(Reads very fast while opening the paper.)

\[
\text{“Whereas a commission of bankrupt is awarded and issued forth against Abraham Quidnunc, of the parish of St. Martin’s in the fields, upholsterer, dealer and chapman, the said bankrupt is hereby required to surrender himself.” Po, what sig-}
\]
This levelling effect is an eighteenth-century manifestation of the political public sphere and the anxieties it provoked. Suddenly, the British political public was widening, becoming much more informed (albeit with a mix of truths, half-truths, and outright lies) and more argumentative. “Private persons” were actively “discussing concerns,” seeking solutions, and shaping a “common interest.” This, in turn, was portrayed as leading to an altered self-perception: individuals were beginning to put themselves on equal footing with the “real” politicians and national leaders. This was, if anything, only enhanced by the newspapers, where everything and everyone appeared side by side on the page, seemingly equal. So, the public sphere of the Quidnuncs was elevating, in their own minds, the political individual to the national stage. And given the central role allotted in Habermas’s scheme to the self-consciousness of the people composing the public sphere, this portrayal becomes even more telling.

Every theatrical Quidnunc aspires to become the subject of the news, an aspiration that could indeed be realized because of the newspapers’ broad range of coverage. Thus, Fielding’s Politicks dreams of achieving fame as a “coffee-house politician”:

You may live to see me one of the greatest Men in England. . . . where had been all those twenty different Schemes which I have now ready to lay before the Parliament, greatly for my own Honour and the Interest of my Country? Hark ye, I have contrived a Method to pay off the Debts of the Nation, without a Penny of Money.

So, beyond the social and personal denunciation of the effects of the new political engagement on contemporary culture, the fundamental condemnation and anxiety focused on its effects on the nation’s political sphere. For Murphy, as for others, the thirst for news, the ever-present “What news?,” meant the downfall of the political nation. An inclusive debating society based on fickle newspaper materials undermined the boundaries between elite and open-door politics. Indeed, such a society was easily susceptible to manipulation at the hands of bribed news writers and lent itself to flattering the multitude, leaving the nation at peril.

The newspaper’s levelling effect, then, had two distinct aspects: not only were all readers placed on the same level, but so were the various types of materials, subjects, and themes. A breakdown of hierarchy ensued: everyone was privy to important information once controlled by a select few, while the uniqueness and value of this information was further eroded by being placed on the same level as gossip and information about the theater. A sense of loss of order, of priority, scale, values, and social structure was manifest—above all
with respect to the political sphere. In Richard Cumberland’s sarcastic dedication of *The Choleric Man* (1775), the levelling of politics through the press is highlighted: “now the reader is convey’d under your [newspaper’s] auspices to the foot of the throne; you have the key that admits him into the cabinets of all the princes in Europe; nay, you . . . uncover the roofs of our closets and chambers to his view.” As described in 1811 by Joseph Holman, the phenomenon was viewed as nationwide: “Britons crowd in haste to read [the newspapers].” Similarly, the focus of the epilogue of Prince Hoare’s *Indiscretion* (1800) is the effects of the newspaper on the nation, offering an unrestricted indication of Hoare’s view as a meta-text enabling the author to “dramatize issues in cultural politics.” Hoare’s mood is rather elegiac, indicating his unease about the changes in political culture:

The records of the day, sure none will doubt,  
Can make the OUTS be in, the INS be out;  
And of such force is their commanding station,  
A hint from them shall sink or save the nation.

This transformation in the nation’s political life is corroborated by historical research. Popular involvement in the very make-up of mid- and late eighteenth-century politics is well documented, confirming that although large swathes of the British nation remained disengaged and unrepresented, others found ways to participate despite being partially or wholly disenfranchised. By the 1760s, extraparliamentary forces became significant in British politics. The printshops and the coffeehouses both played an important role, with newspapers and vigorous debate in effect creating “an alternative structure to politics.” In the Wilkesite period, petitioning was well established as a political driving force whose effects were felt even outside London, if to a lesser degree. While radicalism was significant in the latter part of the century, much historical debate focused on the widespread anti-radical popular politics during the 1790s, including the claim that Pitt’s government effectively controlled the political public sphere through print, associations, and popular politics.

During the eighteenth century, extraparliamentary political participation expanded slowly and unevenly across the social spectrum and grew in influence. Kathleen Wilson has demonstrated that more and more individuals gradually became aware of their political role, first through oppositionary politics, but also, by the 1770s, through loyalist as well as radical groups. A growing number of people “claimed the right to regulate their superiors’ political behavior.”

Though white middle- or upper-class males dominated the political sphere, still “urban political culture supported the sites and practices which enabled ‘the people’ to transform themselves into citizens through their actions in the public sphere.” By the end of the century, public opinion was increasingly becoming an element that state authority had to take into account. Newspapers
were central to these trends and were “of singular importance in structuring
national political imagery, helping to shape the social, political and national
consciousness of middling and artisanal people . . . and binding men and
women in particular ways to the wider political process.”

Quidnunc culture was in many ways a forerunner of these changes. This is
skilfully conveyed in Murphy’s prologue to The Upholsterer (originally deliv-
ered by the Irish actor Henry Mossop). It is noteworthy that Murphy’s ideas and
critique were delivered as part of the prologue, which was, as Dror Wahrman
argues, along with the epilogue, “a form that blurred the usually safely main-
tained distinctions between on-stage and offstage, between dramatic character
and the actor’s or actress’s persona, between fantasy and reality, and between
‘fiction’ and ‘life.’ . . . Moreover, it was the prologues and epilogues, attuned
to the particular concerns and interests of the audience at any given moment,
that satiated a performance within the specific temporal context of the world
outside the theater.” Speaking of the “politically mad” groups and a political
culture that could create “An Areopagus in ev’ry street,” Murphy painted a por-
trait of the contemporary scene:

What news ye cry? . . .
A parliament of porters here shall muse
On state affairs—“swall’wing a taylor’s news,”
For ways and means no starv’d projector sleeps;
And ev’ry shop some mighty statesman keeps;
He Britain’s foes, like Bobadil, can kill;
Supply th’ Exchequer, and neglect his till.
In ev’ry ale-house legislators meet;
And patriots settle kingdoms in the fleet.

Thus, some contemporaries depicted a new political culture fuelled by the press
and practiced through interaction, which was open to all and which, in their
opinion, created a new and dangerous type of common politician. Although
voting reform was still a century away, a new type of political involvement was
perceived as affecting political power, manifestly serving as a harbinger of a
political public sphere.

* * *

The eighteenth-century critical depiction of the Quidnunc prefigures a certain
twentieth-century portrayal of political life as composed of endless and repetitive
conversation on issues that are often trivial (but sometimes mask the vital), with
little real-world upshots. This picture represents a widening of the political, and
in many ways lies at the heart of the perceived negative effects of the news press.
A particular sterile quality of the Quidnunc seems to be part of this early critical
depiction. His is not politics in its traditional sense, as Murphy explains:
He turns a Bankrupt for the public Good!
Undone himself, yet full of England’s Glory!
A politician! neither Whig nor Tory.117

The object of anxiety, then, appears to be political activity as it is imagined by various Quidnuncs—for no Quidnunc, after all, makes actual decisions or holds positions of power. Quidnuncs are not portrayed as taking part in any aspect of elections or serious petitioning, or even as engaging in radical politics or with oppositional groups. Even the mob is not part of the representation; it is not necessarily a dreaded actual outcome of a Quidnunc culture. On a deeper level, then, the criticism is directed at the lack of genuine action in the political system. The alarm caused by a Quidnunc culture lies in the change of political consciousness. Shaped by the levelling effect, this new consciousness was a bedrock for future changes in the actual political life of the nation. It is intimately tied to the emergence of the newspaper and to what can be identified as the emergence of a Habermasian public sphere. An open-access public opinion fashioned through debate and information dissemination renders the (parodied) actual political clout of the Quidnuncs somewhat irrelevant. The critics, in tune with the news press and intimately acquainted with its writing and consumption, were well placed to evaluate some of the outcomes of the Quidnunc phenomenon. In their portrayal, Quidnunc culture served as an extreme illustration of the press’s impact on politics more than a century before the advent of actual formal change (such as the 1832 Reform Bill). It seems that satirists would agree with Habermas that transformations in the public sphere are of a constitutive significance—the Quidnunc culture representing the feared future of the public sphere. The anxiety regarding the politicization and opening of the public sphere, the creation of public opinion, and of knowledgeable, engaged, and argumentative individuals are all distilled into the critique of the Quidnunc.

NOTES

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2. Murphy, Upholsterer, front matter.

3. Joseph Addison, The Tatler No. 155 (6 April 1710). Slight modifications were made by the Critical Review, such as the updating of “Affairs of the Allies” to “Affairs of the Continent.”
7. See note 3. This is also evident in a particular performance in 1789 as analyzed by O’Quinn, 264.
11. It should be noted that Habermas is not an historian. His is a theoretical model influenced (with vital amendments) by Marxism and the Frankfurt School and not part of a Whig (or other) English historical debate. His motivation should also be acknowledged: the work is the product of the trauma of National Socialism and the task of creating a long-lasting democratic German state. Therefore, the ideal age is a starting point for Habermas’s analysis of the structural transformation, which is vital when dealing with its breakdown rather than an absolute and fundamental historical argument. See Nicholas Garnham, “Habermas and the Public Sphere,” *Global Media and Communication* 3, no. 2 (2007): 201–14, 202–3.
13. Lake and Pincus, 288. The history of the press does indicate some major and minor transformations during the eighteenth century. Some of these changes were not well reflected in the theater’s depiction of newspapers, but since the present article focuses on a specific aspect of the demand side (the Quidnunc-type reader) rather than on the internal workings and changes in the supply side (the newspaper), this drawback is much less of a hindrance. On eighteenth-century English newspapers, see Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics and English Society, 1695–1855* (Harlow, 2000); Geoffrey Allen Cranfield, *The Development of the Provincial Newspaper, 1700–1760* (Oxford, 1962); and Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1991).
16. For a detailed account of political control of the press and the struggle for independence, see Arthur Aspinall’s classical *Politics and the Press* (London, 1949), and the forthright and somewhat problematic claim by Lucyle Werkmeister: “for the next many years, the history of newspapers is only another chronicle of political corruption” (*The London Daily Press* [Lincoln, 1963], 1). Advertisements (and *Advertisers* beginning with Matthew Jenour’s *Daily Advertiser* in 1730) indicated another possible solution.
20. Kathleen Wilson underlines the value of the theater in the study of colonial eigh-
teenth-century British history, highlighting the theater’s role in familiarizing audiences with “emergent typologies of gender, race, class and nation” (“Rowe’s Fair Penitent as Global History: or, a Diversionary Voyage to New South Wales,” Eighteenth-Century Studies 41, no. 2 [2008]: 231–51, 232).


23. Loftis, 253.


25. For instance, Addison was cast in a middle-class role in Edward A. Bloom and Lillian D. Bloom, Joseph Addison’s Sociable Animal: In the Market Place, on the Hustings, in the Pulpit (Providence, 1971). But in the analysis of David Daiches, Addison had a “dual-class” role and was a “socially mediating figure, with both bourgeois and aristocratic connections” (“Literature and Social Mobility,” in Aspects of History and Class Consciousness, ed. István Mészáros [London, 1971], 152–72, 161). For a summary of more recent views on the complexity of the “Whig” label, see Brian Cowan, “Mr. Spectator and the Coffeehouse Public Sphere,” Eighteenth-Century Studies 37, no. 3 (2004): 345–66, 346–47.

26. Cowan, “Mr. Spectator,” 346–47. Cowan goes on to argue that Habermas was wrong in overemphasizing the role of the Addison and Steele publications in his model of the public sphere.


28. Murphy, I.[iii].

29. First appearing in The Tatler No. 155 (6 April 1710), Quidnunc also returned in The Tatler No. 160 (18 April 1710). There were some predecessors, such as in George Farquhar’s Sir Harry Wildair, Drury-Lane (April 1701). 30. The Tatler No. 178 (30 May 1710). A “relative” appeared later in the Spectator: Beaver the haberdasher.

31. The Addison and Steele publications aimed at creating a “spectatorial ethos” based on a theatrical experience by using dramatic methods and reflecting people’s normal lives (with which the readers could identify), with the hope of stimulating readers’ interest and creating avid consumers. See Anthony Pollock, “Neutering Addison and Steele: Aesthetic Failure and the Spectatorial Public Sphere,” English Language History 74, no. 3 (2007): 707–34, 712.


33. Habermas, Structural Transformation, xv.

34. McKeon, 273–74.

35. Rehearsal (1708), preface to vol. 1. The famous examples are Daniel Defoe’s Review, Charles Leslie’s Rehearsal, and John Tutchin’s Observator, representing the highly political spectrum of the press at the time.

36. For Samuel Johnson’s writing of these reports (1740–43), see Benjamin B. Hoover, Samuel Johnson’s Parliamentary Reporting: Debates in the Senate of Lilliput (Berkeley, 1953).
37. Hoover, 135.
40. Murphy, II.[v]. On the importance of the West Indian context to the play, see O’Quinn, *Entertaining Crisis*, 262–63.
42. See Heyd, 124–29, where there is further discussion of the political impact of newspapers.
43. Lake and Pincus, 290.
44. Murphy, II.[v].
45. William Thomas Moncrieff, *All at Coventry*, Olympic Theatre (8 Jan. 1816), ii.
46. For example, this is evident in the letters of the Liverpudlian Charles Goore, where he refers to habitual and assumed reading of London papers outside the metropolis. See, for example, his letter to James McWhirter, 30 July 1775, Clements Library, M-1351: “you’ll find by the London Papers.”
50. Genest speculated that by conjuring up Addison, Murphy attempted to hide his “borrowing” from Henry Fielding’s *Rape upon Rape* (and its revised version, *Coffee House Politician*) (4:517). Indeed, there was no mention of Fielding’s play in the reviews.
52. Fielding, *Rape upon Rape*, II.xi. For example, *Rape upon Rape*, I.v, is dedicated to such a discussion.
53. Fielding, *Rape upon Rape*, II.vi. Politicks was hardly alone in “sacrificing” an offspring on the altar of news. Bramble, in Moncrieff’s *All in Coventry* (scene ii), Mrs. Western and Mrs. Dangle, and Quidnunck all similarly fail in their parental obligations.
55. Werkmeister, 376–79.
57. Lake and Pincus, 273.
58. Murphy, I.[iii].
60. David Garrick, *The Gamesters*, Drury-Lane (22 Dec.1757), III.[ii].
63. For a critical view of gender in Habermas’s model, see Cowan, “What was Masculine about the Public Sphere?: Gender and the Coffeehouse Milieu in Post-Restoration England,” *History Workshop Journal* 51 (2001): 127–57.
66. See, for example, Wahrman, 113–60.
68. Elizabeth Griffith, *School for Rakes*, Drury-Lane (4 Feb. 1769), I.[iii]. Several other plays included avid female newspaper consumers—for example, Hannah Cowley’s *More Ways than One*, Covent Garden (6 Dec. 1783), where Miss Juvenile even tries unsucces-
fully to publish some snippets in the papers (unlike Cowley herself, who published much more than snippets in the Oracle and the World).

69. Reed, II.ii.
70. Werkmeister, 10.
72. Russell, 11. For Russell’s finely tuned analysis of the Habermasian model, see 6–12.
73. See also George Colman, The Clandestine Marriage, Drury-Lane (20 Feb. 1766), II.[i];
76. O’Quinn, Entertaining Crisis, 9.
77. Murphy, II.[v].
78. Wyatt, Katz, and Kim, 89.
79. Habermas, Structural Transformation, 27.
80. McKeown, 274.
82. The portrayal of coffeehouse culture and newspapers on stage, in literature, and by contemporary travelers is well documented: Hunter, 501–3.
83. Anonymous [George Powell], The Cornish Comedy, Theater-Royal in Dorset Garden (1696), IV.i.
84. Murphy, I.[iii]. On the complexity of the public/private dimension of the coffeehouse, see Cowan, “Publicity and Privacy in the History of the British Coffeehouse,” History Compass 5 (2007): 1180–213. Fielding’s Politicks is also a dedicated coffeehouse patron: “I will meet you within an Hour at the Coffee-house, and there we will confer farther,” he assures a fellow news buff (Rape upon Rape, V.[iv]).
86. See Cowan, “Publicity and Privacy,” 1186–89. Cowan highlights a change in the eighteenth-century coffeehouse from a noisy convivial place to a quieter, more individual atmosphere.
88. Elizabeth Griffith, The Double Mistake, Covent Garden (9 Jan. 1766), IV.i. The famous “Cocoa-tree” was connected to news culture as early as the first issue of the Spectator (1 March 1711) as the “origin” of several “newspaper letters.” It became the location for an eponymously named Tory club of vital importance, which became synonymous with the Tory party itself and where political gossip, organization, and discussion were shared by its influential members: see Linda Colley, “The Loyal Brotherhood and the Cocoa Tree: The London Organization of the Tory Party, 1727–1760,” Historical Journal 20, no. 1 (1977): 77–95.
89. William Hodson, The Adventures of a Night, Drury-Lane (1783), I.i. As mentioned above, the barbershop was another locale frequented by Quidnunc. Mostly neglected in the historical debate, this site seems to have played a role in the culture of news vultures. For example, in Edward Beehamp, New Lectures on Heads (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1780), after “A Quidnunc” receives fresh news in the street, he immediately “hastens to the Barber’s shop, to free himself from his beard and his secret at the same time” (32). The barber then goes on to spread the news while cutting his next customer’s hair. And, Colman’s short interlude piece, The Political Barber (1770), which ran for two years in the Theatre Royal in Richmond Green, depicted a conversation between Quidnunc and a barber (The Spouter’s Companion [London, 1770], 94–98). Moreover, a 1772 satirical print portrayed
Quidnunc in the barber shop, while other patrons read the London Evening Post, which carries the results of the Wilkes elections.

91. O’Quinn, Entertaining Crisis, 10–13. O’Quinn again combines the press with the theater in relation to format and authority in this context: “forms of government control [over the press and the theater] were privative but rather that they generated productive strategies of interpretation. . . . The readers of eighteenth-century papers and the audiences for eighteenth-century plays were accustomed, indeed were required to think meta-critically because of both media had built-in mechanisms either for interrupting simple consumption or for representing the way external forces impinged on their production” (Entertaining Crisis, 6).
92. Wyatt, Katz, and Kim, 74.
93. Critics argue that Habermas’s model of communication is exceedingly rational and therefore ignores non-rational elements in the political debate, whether emotional, conflict-based, or self-serving.
94. See Garnham, 210–11.
95. See McKeon, 275. For a critique, see Downie, “Public and Private,” 74.
96. Lake and Pincus, 270–92.
97. Garnham, 206.
98. Vitally, the stage and the press together developed into an arena where key social and cultural issues were negotiated in English society: O’Quinn, Staging Governance: Theatrical Imperialism in London, 1770–1800 (Baltimore, 2005), 11–12.
99. “Termagant” is an established term referring to “a violent, overbearing, turbulent, brawling, quarrelsome woman; a virago, shrew, vixen” (OED).
100. Murphy, II.[i].
101. Murphy, I.[iii].
102. Habermas, Structural Transformation, 27, 55–56.
103. Fielding, Rape upon Rape, I.ii.
106. Russell, 126.
108. See, for example, Nicholas Rogers, Crowds, Culture, and Politics in Georgian Britain (Oxford, 1998); and Harry Dickinson, Politics of the People in Eighteenth-Century Britain (London, 1995).
113. Wilson, Sense of the People, 437.
114. Wilson, Sense of the People, 37.
115. Wahrman, 159.
116. Murphy, front matter.
117. Murphy, prologue.