



Historians Assess the Impact of Print on the Course of American History; The Revolution as a Test Case

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What do we mean by the Revolution? The War? That was no part of the Revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The Revolution was in the minds of the people, and this was effected, from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen years before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington. The records of thirteen legislatures, the pamphlets, newspapers in all the colonies, ought to be consulted during the period to ascertain the steps by which the public opinion was enlightened and informed concerning the authority of Parliament over the colonies.

John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 1815

The nature of the research endeavor directed at discovering “what reading does to people”¹ is interdisciplinary. Educators, sociologists, journalists, political scientists, book publishers, librarians, historians and many others have shown an intense interest in the process by which reading influences human behavior.²

And yet, despite the number of people involved in the pursuit of reading’s impact on human behavior, the results of the search have proven contradictory and confusing. After the appearance of literally thousands of books and articles dealing with this subject, we still find a debate raging over such basic questions as: “How do people read?”; “Does reading affect behavior, and if so, how?”; “Can human behavior be effectively manipulated by means of the printed word, and if so, how?”

Anyone trying to build upon earlier investigations of the impact of

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reading is thus faced with a confusing, and frequently misleading, body of research findings which contribute little, if anything, to the development of a theory of communication which will explain the impact of reading on human behavior.³ As a result, most scholars concerned with this matter are generally forced to begin their work from the "bottom up," so to speak. That is, they must arrive at their hypotheses inductively and then proceed to investigate them empirically in what is generally a very limited fashion.

This process seems circular and leads further and further into a morass of findings which in time will frustrate even the most determined scholar. My awareness of the shortcomings of the present approach to this problem, and my conviction that it is impossible to exaggerate the significance of research on the impact of print on human behavior, has led me to take a somewhat different approach to the question.

For eight years, I have been involved in a long-range research project designed to do the following things: (1) assess the availability of books in the Ohio Valley prior to 1860; (2) assess the nature and extent of book ownership in the Ohio Valley prior to 1860; (3) assess the impact of the printed word on major social and political movements, such as anti-Catholic and antislavery, in the Ohio Valley prior to 1860; and (4) to prepare case studies which, taken together, may contribute to the construction of a model demonstrating the impact of reading on human behavior in the past. Hopefully, this model will generate hypotheses and suggest methods which will prove useful to those investigating the influence of reading on contemporary social and political behavior.

This type of investigation is extremely complicated and time consuming. I would like to report now that I had completed my work and that this article is a summary of my findings. Unfortunately that is not the case, for I am still deeply involved in phases one and two of the project.⁴

However, over the past several years I have made rather extensive explorations of the ways in which other historians have attempted to deal with the question of the impact of print, and this is what my article attempts to cover.⁵

It is increasingly fashionable among historians to label one's predecessors in some way or another. That is, nearly every period of American history has been treated by Whig historians, progressive historians, consensus historians, and new left historians, among

others.⁶ These categories are of little use in dealing with the impact of print, because there appears to be considerable agreement relative to the impact of print upon human behavior. Nearly all historians appear committed to the position that the printed media are extremely influential forces for molding and directing public opinion.

In fact, there appear to be only two basic schools of thought among historians when it comes to assessing the impact of print on human behavior. One group, which we might term the propaganda school, argues that ideas transmitted by means of the printed page are powerful tools in the hands of a skillful and devious minority intent on forming and manipulating public opinion. To those who subscribe to this view, ideas in print become mighty engines indeed; but engines which are always mastered and adroitly directed by clever men.

The second camp, which might be called the idea school, is made up of those who argue that behavior is motivated by deeply held, but dimly perceived, ideas and beliefs. While the printed word can stimulate and provoke, it cannot force men to behave in ways contrary to their most cherished beliefs. In short, men become more the victims than manipulators of ideas.⁷

In the following pages we will attempt to illustrate the ways historians have investigated the impact of print in the past, and discuss in more detail the conclusions they have drawn as a result of their research. To discuss the historical approach to this problem in relation to the 350 years of U.S. recorded past would take a book or a number of books and would prove redundant in the extreme. Thus, I have chosen to treat here the historians' assessment of the influence of print on perhaps the most studied epoch in American history: the coming of the American Revolution, 1763-1776.⁸

As pointed out earlier, historians are split into two rather distinct groups when it comes to the impact of print on social and political behavior. One group, represented most formidably by Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., was especially active during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, and in the larger scheme of American historiography is generally known as the progressive historians.⁹ This group was influenced by the persuasive literature on propaganda and its awesome effects, which grew out of studies of World War I.¹⁰

These studies generally agreed that propaganda, properly prepared and disseminated, was an enormously influential tool, not

infrequently utilized by vicious men bent on capturing the minds of their fellows. They further agreed that the audiences for such propaganda messages were usually quite receptive and passive.

This is the research which gave rise to the theory of communication that Wilbur Schramm so aptly labeled the "bullet theory."¹¹ That is, if the propagandist properly molded his propaganda bullet, and fired it accurately, he would note that his target fell down.

Historians who had examined this literature, and who viewed its implications with considerable alarm, used it as a framework for their own investigations of the American Revolution. In doing so, they soon discovered some rather remarkable parallels.¹²

These historians focused on the social and economic aspects of American history, and influenced by the beliefs and rhetoric of the Progressive era, came to see American history as one tortuous struggle between the common people, seeking their freedom, and the rich and well born, determined to insure the safety of private property and protect the right of the republic's "best men" to rule. Furthermore, they saw man's economic self-interest as being the controlling element in his behavior.

Being thus convinced of man's basic motivations, they were unequivocally opposed to the notion that "ideas" could move nations. Such ideas were generally only camouflage for deeper motives. The net result of their studies, as Jack Greene has pointed out, was to further challenge the sincerity of colonial spokesmen and to "contribute to the conception of the Revolution as a movement begun by a group of wealthy conservatives for essentially economic motives and subsequently arrogated by a small band of radical conspirators using the debate with Britain to accomplish other, more important political, economic, and social ends within the colonies."¹³ While their work diminished the already low reputation of ideas as important forces in the revolutionary movement, it tended to verify the studies of political scientists and journalists; i.e., it supported the bullet theory.

Historians of this period focused on radical politicians like Samuel Adams, Joseph Warren, and James Otis and proved them to be propagandists supreme. As one authority argued, "without their work independence would not have been declared in 1776 nor recognized in 1783."¹⁴ Later, a reviewer commenting on Phillip Davidson's book, *Propaganda and the American Revolution*, said: "At the outset of the revolution a small minority gradually . . .

transformed an apathetic and somewhat reluctant majority into a united people.”¹⁵ Thus, the picture emerged of a remarkably skillful minority wielding propaganda tools—especially the printed media—as weapons in an extremely successful campaign to control and direct the minds of a generally uncritical and simple-minded public.¹⁶

But, in arriving at this interpretation, the propaganda school of historians denigrated the thought of the revolutionaries, and labeled their leaders as hypocritical demagogues, an interpretation which ran counter to earlier assessments of the Revolution, and which did not sit well with the new wave of historians just then entering the field.¹⁷ Furthermore, the conception of the masses as being “simple-minded rustics” easily “bamboozled” by clever manipulators was to be challenged with increasing frequency by historians, who were convinced that the revolutionary generation was both literate and independent; and by social scientists who were revising their earlier, rather simplistic, model of propaganda to the extent that they finally concluded, as Schramm and Roberts wryly noted—“that the bullet theory was full of holes.”¹⁸

This new breed of historians, armed with fresh insights derived from contemporary studies of the impact of print on human behavior, and imbued with a firm conviction that there was a causal relationship between the ideas held by the revolutionaries and their behavior, set out to reexamine the revolutionary epoch from a new perspective.

The leading exponent of this new thrust is Bernard Bailyn, Harvard historian and the author of the most influential book on the Revolution to appear in more than a decade. That book, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, and the studies of his very able graduate students, have tended to redirect the interpretation of the American Revolution, until most modern students of the era are now “prepared to accept the American Revolution for what it said it was—a political and constitutional struggle over sovereignty, a battle where who was right was more important than whose pocketbook was being pinched.”¹⁹

Bailyn himself best summarized this new view, when he wrote that his research:

confirmed my rather old-fashioned view that the American Revolution was above all else an ideological, constitutional, political struggle and not primarily a controversy between social

groups undertaken to force changes in the organization of the society or the economy. It confirmed too my belief that intellectual developments in the decade before Independence led to a radical idealization and conceptualization of the previous century and a half of American experience, and that it was this intimate relationship between Revolutionary thought and the circumstances of life in eighteenth-century America that endowed the Revolution with its peculiar force and made it so profoundly a transforming event.²⁰

As ideas became important again as determinants of behavior, historians industriously pursued the lineage of those that the revolutionaries were expounding.²¹ Study after study confirmed Bailyn's contention that the radical Whig tradition and the ideas of the European Enlightenment were merged into a complete, formalized and systematic ideology before 1776 by the revolutionary leaders.²²

At one level scholars carefully examined the kinds of books available in the colonies, the nature of the colonial book trade, and the contents of the colonists' libraries. At another level, scholars analyzed the publishing process in the colonies—especially the newspaper press,—and detailed the spread of printing and the wide availability of certain printed works in eighteenth-century America. At yet another level, scholars investigated the content of colonial literature—especially the revolutionary literature—for, as Bailyn pointed out, this literature not only demonstrated what they believed, but explained why they believed it, and even frequently revealed the sources of revolutionary thought.²³

The cumulative result of this new thrust in the study of the American Revolution has been to cast aside the earlier progressive view. The broad implications of this new school for the writing of American history is not germane to this paper, but the ways in which it has influenced the historian's conception of the impact of print on social and political behavior is of real importance.

Certainly the most significant revision came in the analysis in the nature of the audience for printed works in eighteenth-century America. Scholars found that the colonials were remarkably literate and generally well-informed on political matters.²⁴ Such an audience could hardly have been as apathetic and easily manipulated as was once believed. Slowly the conception of the audience as an inert

mass was revised until the equation of print impact came to be reversed; i.e., it was now a question of what the audience did to the printed communication, rather than what the communication did to the audience.

The printed media came to be seen as reflectors of public opinion rather than molders of it. The picture of a few self-interested propagandists manipulating public opinion by means of the printed word was generally discarded. In its place emerged a portrait of a people struggling with a complex intellectual system which was made up of dimly perceived and poorly understood ideas, which eventually coalesced in the mid-eighteenth century as an ideology for revolt. The printed media came to be viewed as facilitators in this search for an ideology, but not as creators of the thought itself.

To say that this view currently holds the field is not to suggest that historians are of one mind on this matter. There are many scholars who disagree with this view: there are those who see imported ideas as inconsequential in American history; some still view the concept of propaganda as a viable approach to the Revolution; and some, influenced by Marxist constructs, posit yet another interpretation.²⁵

Indeed, those seeking findings which might contribute to the formulation of intelligent hypotheses explaining the impact of print on contemporary social and political behavior will find that the literature on the American Revolution offers little in the way of new avenues of thought. At best, the research completed to date appears to contribute little beyond occasional verification of hypotheses currently being tested by journalists, political scientists, and social psychologists.

However, by discarding the distinctions between the various "schools" of interpretation, and by taking an eclectic approach to the historical literature, it is possible to define some specific areas where historians have made contributions to our understanding of the impact of print on human behavior.

One reason this eclectic approach bears fruit is that historians of the American Revolution rarely set out to answer Harold Lasswell's classic question about the communication process: "Who says what in which channel to whom with what effect?"²⁶ Much more frequently historians will consider this question only in relation to larger studies of the Revolution. As a result one must dig in a mass of research related to the Revolution to find material treating the impact of print on that great era in U.S. history. Doing this, one discovers that

the findings which seem of the most importance cluster nicely around several facets of the communication process.

The Communicator. Students of the American Revolution have been forced to focus again and again on the dozen or so polemicists who appear to have played a considerable role in the making of that rebellion. And while the majority of the best work seems to suggest that the ability of an "incendiary" like Sam Adams to influence the behavior of his fellows through his inflammatory writings has been exaggerated, there are still some real questions remaining. Research shows that Adams thought he was molding public opinion, his opponents thought he was driving the reluctant masses to revolt; and the people frequently commented on his effectiveness. It is certain that Adams and Paine, for instance, were able to prepare and disseminate their messages in a way which allowed them greater success than their contemporaries in stirring up their fellow Americans. The case studies of the dozen or so major propagandists of the Revolution now available make provocative reading for all those interested in the communication process.

Research on the communicator in the revolutionary era also demonstrates clearly the "two-step," or better yet, "multistep," theory of communication in action. Numerous studies have clearly shown the ways in which ideas were successively filtered from authors like Locke to popularizers like Trenchard and Gordon, to Jefferson, to Adams, to local newspapers, and then to the reading public.

The Audience. As noted earlier, studies tend to support the contemporary view of "audience" as an extremely complex entity which molds and alters communication much more than communication alters it. Studies of the impact of print during the revolutionary era have been especially productive in delineating the "selectivity" with which the colonial audience approached communication. They appear to have read and assimilated only that literature which tended to reinforce their views on social and political matters.

The Channel. Another area where historians have made significant contributions to contemporary understanding of the communication process is in their study of the channels through which the messages were transmitted. Extensive studies have been made of all kinds of

print media: i.e., books, pamphlets, broadsides and newspapers. Contemporary scholars should benefit considerably from the detailed blueprint of the total communications environment which is under construction by historians of the Revolution.

The Effect of the Communication. Historians have generally contributed little toward explaining the ways in which print actually influences human behavior. They have contributed much towards our knowledge of "who said what to whom in what channel," but the generalizations about effect are usually vague, and not infrequently contradictory. Historians seem hesitant to tackle the ultimate question relative to the role of the print media in the past: What impact did printed messages have on political and social behavior?

Part of this hesitancy grows out of methodological shortcomings and part out of the historians' general dislike for grappling with the question of the causal relationship between ideas and behavior. Finally, historians have too rarely focused directly on the question: What impact did the print media have on the individual and collective behavior of Americans in the years directly preceding the Revolution?

Some of these problems will always remain serious obstacles to historians interested in this area, while others appear to be easily overcome. This paper concludes by discussing what I view to be the problems and potential of historical research on the impact of print on human behavior.

The first question facing the historian interested in the communication process during the revolutionary era is: What did they read? Answering that question satisfactorily is difficult, and explains the emphasis placed on studies of the availability of printed materials and the extent and nature of book ownership in colonial America. The task is to identify the material the colonists were reading, read it, and then attempt to assess the ways in which this material reflected or altered the views of the American revolutionaries. Such an undertaking calls for enormous discipline; to achieve even a modicum of success the historian must totally immerse himself in the literature of the period. One recent scholar noted that in order to come to some understanding of the political thought shared by American society, he examined "all materials in print—newspapers, magazines, books, broadsides, pamphlets, sermons, brochures, and so forth—which met two conditions: first, that

they be issued from American presses; and second, that they were written by Americans in the years from 1689 to 1763."²⁷

Historians are the first to admit that one can make too much of the connection between books owned and books read, but as Colbourn notes, taken in "association with other evidence, such as notes, marginalia, citations, recommendations, repeated purchases, books can be evaluated; and then, by reading them, one can re-create the perspective of an earlier age."²⁸

However, a historian's endeavor is less than half complete when he feels that he has satisfactorily established the perspective that Colbourn alluded to. For if the historian is to really come to grips with the question of what impact the printed medium had on the Revolution, he must delineate what people thought, in addition to what they had the opportunity to read. In short, he must accurately judge public opinion.

To do so is difficult enough for the social scientist who is capable of examining his subjects' behavior first hand; it poses even more serious problems for the historian. Nevertheless, through a process of mental reconstruction, the historian must recreate in his mind the "climate of opinion" in revolutionary America. To accomplish this rather considerable task he has only his assessment of what the colonials read and the research of earlier historians to guide his steps.²⁹

Once the historian has arrived at an understanding of what the revolutionaries read and what they believed (not always the same), he can begin the extremely tenuous task of trying to reconcile the two elements. In doing so, he will have to distinguish between the influence exerted by ideas and that brought to bear by such dynamic concerns as economics, kinship, and religion on the developments being studied.

In the face of such complexity it is no wonder that many historians have concluded that there is little advantage to investing the time and energy required to investigate thoroughly the question of the influence of print on human behavior.³⁰ Nor is it difficult to understand why contemporary behavioral scientists have been skeptical of the findings of such investigations.

I believe there is considerable promise in this area of study. For one thing, only historians can examine the influence of the media over long periods of time. Schramm once noted that the most potent effects of the mass media may be the less dramatic ones built up like

stalagmites in a cave—drop by drop, year by year.³¹ If he is right, then historians become central to the research effort on the mass media, for only historians can provide contemporary scholars with the perspective necessary for the measurement of long-term change.

At the same time, students like Bailyn, Wood, Rossiter, and Colbourn have demonstrated convincingly that the interrelationships between reading (and thinking) and human behavior in the past can be systematically and rewardingly studied. At least there is now enough successful work to justify some patience on the part of the scholarly community, as historians strive to diminish the methodological shortcomings now flawing their work, and to push back the boundaries of knowledge of what reading does to people.

References

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6. Book-length analyses of American historiography abound. See, for example: Higham, John, et al. *History*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice Hall, 1965; Kraus, Michael. *The Writing of American History*. Norman, Okla., University of Oklahoma Press, 1953; and Wish, Harvey. *The American Historian*. New York, Oxford University Press, 1960.

7. This division of the literature was suggested by the provocative essay: Wood, Gordon S. "Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., 22:3-32, Jan. 1966.

8. In addition to Wood's essay, there are a number of other interpretations of the historical literature of importance to our study. See: Billias, George A. "The Revolutionary Era; Reinterpretations and Revisions." In George A. Billias and Gerald N. Grob, eds. *American History; Retrospect and Prospect*. New York, Free Press, 1971, pp. 34-84; Greene, Jack P. *The Reappraisal of the American Revolution in Recent Historical Literature*. Washington, D.C., Service Center for Teachers of History, 1967; Morgan, Edmund S. "The American Revolution: Revisions in Need of Revising," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., 14:3-15, Jan. 1957; Morris, Richard B. "Historians and the American Revolution." In ————. *The American Revolution Reconsidered*. New York, Harper & Row, 1968, pp. 1-42; and Wright, Esmond. "Historians and the Revolution." In ————. *Causes and Consequences of the American Revolution*. Chicago, Quadrangle Books, 1966, pp. 15-51. For an assessment of the British literature, see: Greene, Jack P. "The Plunge of Lemmings: A Consideration of Recent Writings on British Politics and the American Revolution," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 67:141-75, Winter 1968.

9. The better known progressive historians are dealt with at length in Richard Hofstadter. *The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington*. New York, Knopf, 1968. See also the items cited in ref. 6.

10. Wood, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9. An example of the type of study referred to

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11. Schramm and Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

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14. Davidson, *Propaganda and the American Revolution . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 410.

15. Odegard, Peter H. "The Spirit of '76," *Saturday Review of Literature*, 25:5-6, March 7, 1942.

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17. Greene, *Reappraisal of the American Revolution . . .*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

18. Schramm and Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 10. Two papers which were particularly critical of the propaganda school's view of "audience" were: Miller, Perry. "From the Covenant to the Revival." In James W. Smith, and Leland A. Jamison, eds. *Religion in American Life*. Vol. 1. *The Shaping of American Religion*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961, pp. 322-68; and Morgan, Edmund S. "The American Revolution Considered as an Intellectual Movement." In Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., and Morton White, eds. *Paths of American Thought*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1963, pp. 11-33.

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