



Handwritten Newspapers

*An Alternative Medium during the Early Modern
and Modern Periods*

Edited by Heiko Droste and Kirsti Salmi-Niklander

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Handwritten Newspapers. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on a Social Practice

The handwritten newspaper, as yet little studied, is a multi-faceted genre of scribal culture. It originated as an exclusive news service in the 16th century. It was then adapted to the changing 17th-century news market and the introduction of printed newspapers. Between the Enlightenment and the 20th century, handwritten newspapers served both the internal communication needs of small groups and communities, as well as the need for political debate.

This book is the first edited volume focusing on handwritten newspapers from a wide historical, international and interdisciplinary perspective. The editors have conducted long-term research on early modern printed and handwritten newspapers (Heiko Droste), and handwritten newspapers during the modern period (Kirsti Salmi-Niklander). The participants of a workshop in Uppsala in September 2015 discussed handwritten newspapers from different disciplinary perspectives (history, folklore studies, literary history, and media history), raising various research questions. However, our primary focus in this volume is on handwritten newspapers as a social practice and their role in literary cultures. Our aim is to contextualize the material with regard to how it relates to political, cultural, and economic history. The analysis reveals both continuity and change in line with the different forms and functions of the material.

To allow for comparison we started by discussing definitions and generic features. How should a handwritten newspaper be defined? What demarcates it from other genres of scribal publication, and from personal writings? How have writers and readers termed the papers (e.g. *nouvelles à la main* in 18th-century France, *lagsavis* in the Norwegian Labour Movement)? These questions can be addressed in various ways: analytically by discussing contemporary debates on handwritten newspapers based on generic markers such as titles, editors, and type of layout (columns or other imitations of printed papers), and not least by categorizing the content (news, advertisements, leaders, essays).

Another common ground was our focus on the writer's interests and motives: Why were handwritten newspapers still produced after the introduction of the printed press? How did the handwritten newspaper adapt to a changing news market? What role does censorship play? Were

handwritten newspapers a means of creating an avant-garde medium for literary and artistic experiment, or for literary and editorial training? Alternatively, should we highlight its functions as a means of creating cohesion in small groups and promoting the use of vernacular language, or with an eye on the production of documents for future historical research?

Finally, we considered some material aspects. What distinctive practices related to the production of handwritten newspapers? How were these newspapers edited, published and distributed? How and where have they been archived? How are they related to printed publications and other forms of copying (hectograph, lithograph)?

The time span ranges from the 16th to the early 20th century, and the material includes case studies from various countries in Europe (Finland, Great Britain, Greece, Iceland, Norway, Poland, Romania/Hungary, and Sweden), from the United States, and St. Barthélemy (Caribbean). Handwritten newspapers can be put into perspective in these different societies in the contexts of colonialism, socialism, nationalism, and religion.

Distinctions

Research on handwritten newspapers as a genre follows a number of defining distinctions. The most obvious one is that between early modern and modern material, which follows institutional settings at universities. It is a distinction that is based to some extent on the genre's changing design. Early modern newspapers tended to resemble personal letters, even though they could be produced in hundreds of copies.¹ The situation was the opposite in 19th- and 20th-century handwritten newspapers: they tended to imitate printed papers in terms of layout and content, giving the impression of being "real" newspapers with an established circulation, even though they were generally produced as one single manuscript copy.² This distinction is also reflected in the different readerships. Handwritten newspapers in early modern times were addressed to social elites, members of which were the only people who could afford their rather high prices. Handwritten newspapers in the 19th and 20th centuries, on the other hand, met the needs of social and political groups that, for different reasons, were marginalized or at least not part of any social or political elite.

The same distinction is also marked in the content of handwritten newspapers. Social elites were interested in news about other elites, particularly in court circles, thereby reaching out for more knowledge of their world. The newspapers thus served as a medium for enhancing understanding of contemporary history. More or less marginalized, sometimes clandestine groups in modern times used handwritten newspapers as a means of internal communication as well as social cohesion. This change in content thus signifies how the handwritten newspaper lost in terms of social recognition,

1 Love 1993, 9–12.

2 Cf. the chapter by Klimis Mastoridis in this volume.

changing from an expensive luxury to a rather mundane medium of communication.

For all of these differences, the 18th century represents a dividing line in the history of the genre, which could also explain why there are so few studies on 18th-century material. The purpose of the handwritten newspaper was somehow vague or shifting. The most prominent study on French material conducted by Robert Darnton emphasizes the clandestine character of French handwritten newspapers as a means of critical political discourse.³ Two older German studies carried out by Ulrich Blindow⁴ and Lore Sporhan-Krempel⁵ on Berlin and Nürnberg, respectively, also stress the function of spreading sensitive news on matters of politics. However, in these cases the handwritten newspaper did not serve distinct political goals, but was rather a means of acquiring more exclusive news than the printed material could offer – due to the hardening state censorship.⁶ It is obvious, however, that the public handwritten newspaper turned into something else, something private, although the exact meaning of this privacy is hard to pinpoint. This new sphere could be described as a semi-public (or semi-private) sphere, related to the expansion of literacy and the rise of popular movements in different European countries and in North America.

The early modern perspective

Most researchers clearly argue from an early modern perspective, analyzing the medium as part of a future that is framed by the Habermasian public sphere and an on-going state-building process. This framework is applied on all early modern material and inevitably demands an audience and public debate, thereby promoting the role of the (printed and handwritten) newspaper as part of a political discourse. Politics, in turn, requires a society, according to the definition of politics as power-based decision-making aimed at the formation of a social community.⁷ The early modern handwritten newspaper is, unsurprisingly, largely a research object among historians, with few exceptions⁸, analyzing a medium for political debate and information on politics, a medium that reaches outwards – into a more or less well defined publicness.⁹

Handwritten newspapers of the last 200 years, on the other hand, have generally attracted scholars of literature, ethnology, sociolinguistics, and cultural anthropology. Their studies follow new agendas, answer other questions, and offer different results that focus mainly on the social and

3 Darnton 2010a; 2000b.

4 Blindow 1939.

5 Sporhan-Krempel 1968.

6 Both studies therefore mostly concern censorship material from Berlin and Nürnberg. Cf. also Belo 2004.

7 Schlögl 2008, footnote 36.

8 Böning 2011.

9 Cf. Droste's chapter in this volume and Droste 2018.

literary aspects of the medium. The present volume clearly shows this shift in interest. So far, researchers working on early modern and modern handwritten newspapers have hardly talked to each other, which is why we as the organizers of this project distinctly invited scholars from different countries and different academic disciplines who have been doing research on handwritten newspapers from the 16th to the 20th century. The workshop presentations demonstrated obvious changes in the use and functions of handwritten newspapers in the long run, and not only due to dramatic changes in the news market in the last 500 years. There are, however, equally obvious similarities, which tend to disappear behind institutional settings that distinguish early modern from modern history, as well as the respective research materials.

As a result, the long-term perspective on handwritten newspapers is so far missing, and not only due to a lack of interest. Equally important is the fact that many studies are not very explicit in defining their source material. There are only a few discussions about the genre itself, and most studies do not address that question at all. In that respect, Michał Salamonik's chapter on the first Polish printed newspapers is of interest. The editor of that newspaper had been publishing a handwritten newspaper for quite some time before, for unknown reasons, engaging in editing a printed version, which existed for only a few months. However, he gives an extensive explanation of the significance of the printed newspaper, which conveys a lot about his understanding of both the handwritten and the printed material.

Most researchers argue their case on the basis of one particular collection of what is labeled handwritten newspapers or journals, manuscript newspapers, newsletters and such. On top of that, comparison suffers from shady concepts such as politics or the juxtaposition of the public sphere vs. privacy. The modern understanding of these terms has developed since the 18th century; nevertheless they are often used even for material from the 16th and 17th centuries without further explanation of their contemporary understanding.

The public sphere in particular has been the subject of intense debate among German early modern historians, without any clear result.¹⁰ Nonetheless, early modern handwritten newspapers are still considered a medium for public debate. As a consequence, newspaper historians tend to predate the modern notion of a public sphere interested in politics.¹¹ Most of them simply cannot think of any other reason for reading newspapers, and therefore regularly focus on the "political" content. There are reasons to question this premeditated understanding. The chapter written by Heiko Droste casts doubt on these assumptions and offers a different interpretation, largely based on an analysis of the contemporary discourse on printed newspapers and the court culture.

10 Schlögl 2014 returns in his seminal study on present and absentees to an understanding that changes between publicness and publicity, within the limits of social groups and arenas.

11 Ettinghausen 2015; Behringer 2002, 429.

Heiko Droste asks his audience, metaphorically, to turn around in time and to try to understand even early modern newspapers as a medium for social cohesion and a form of literature. In this way he promotes a different understanding of the early modern material. There are obvious traditions and recurrent features, despite the genre's development over time. These traditions tend to disappear as the research questions change, not least because the terms of the investigations are different or are differently applied by scholars of early modern and modern handwritten newspapers. From this perspective, notions of publicness and the public gain a new meaning. Handwritten newspapers were both public and socially embedded.

News and information

Although one might meaningfully assume that handwritten – and printed for that matter – newspapers were a means of disseminating information, there is more about them and their consumption than the presumed professional interests of different consumer groups suggest. New studies on the so-called *Fuggerzeitungen* – the most renowned German collection of handwritten newspapers from the 16th century – show clearly that this particular one was not designed with the economic interests of this merchant family in mind, as had been assumed for decades.¹² The Fugger needed many more news sources to meet their business needs:

The proportion of economic reports in the *Wiener Fuggerzeitungen* is by no means large enough to constitute an adequate economic information service, making it impossible to maintain the notion that the family's economic decision-making could have been based solely or even principally on the *Fuggerzeitungen*. The *Fuggerzeitungen* cover a multitude of topics.¹³

This also applies to the use of printed newspapers and their functions in the context of the court society. Contrary to our expectations, the newspapers contain rather little information on matters such as ceremonies, representations, and public displays of power, which according to early modern notions of politics were central in terms of understanding of court society. This information was given instead in other media forms.¹⁴ Similar results are to be expected with regard to the content of handwritten newspapers, although so far there have been few studies comparing the content of both genres.¹⁵ However, it seems that all known public news forms covered a rather similar collection of subjects, and shared a common understanding about what was important news in terms of public affairs, with few differences between handwritten and printed newspapers.¹⁶

12 Zwielerlein 2011; cf. also Šimeček 1987, 76; Keller 2012.

13 Schobesberger 2016, 218. A similar comment appears in Sporhan-Krempel 1968, 30.

14 Bauer 2011; 2010, 187–191.

15 Böning 2008.

16 Cf. Droste's chapter in this volume.

Hence, the two genres are rather similar in that both were censored to protect the honor of the Prince and the authorities, as well as the neighboring princes and authorities. It seems that this censorship was less vigorous in the case of handwritten newspapers, which were more open to rumor and unsubstantiated reports that were often marked as unconfirmed. Handwritten newspapers could also accommodate last-minute updates – there was nothing like an original given that all copies were made by hand. It was therefore possible to add the latest news, and to include items that were meant for certain customers.

These striking similarities between handwritten and printed newspapers in the 17th century have caused problems for researchers. Why were there handwritten newspapers in the first place, given that the printed versions offered almost the same news at a far lower price? For one thing, the printing process took a lot of time, which gave the handwritten newspaper a head start: “Therefore, if you make an effort to get a copy [of some important news] on one day, this news probably will be printed in the common gazette the very next day.”¹⁷

There is also the question of exclusiveness, reflecting the conspicuous news consumption of the social elite as a marker of social status. In that respect, the focus on content is misleading. The handwritten newspaper was a social marker, accessible to just a few privileged customer groups. The readers did get some news that did not reach the same audience as the printed versions, but the focus was about the same. The above-mentioned possibility to adjust the content of the handwritten newspaper to certain customers by way of taking in the very latest news is also significant. The fact that the handwritten newspaper regularly referred to the content of the printed version, which in many cases had the same editor, may have given it the exclusivity its customers treasured.

Strangely enough, although the handwritten newspaper had clear features and a particular function within the news consumption of social elites, contemporary interest in newspapers has focused mainly on the printed versions (Michał Salamonik). Treatises on printed newspapers appeared when the genre’s audience reached beyond the social elites. Contrary to our perceptions, once again these discourses on newspapers and news in general did not focus on politics as a distinct sphere of society and government. Instead, they refer to a news medium that covers contemporary history, a history in the making that concerns the common good and public affairs. The assumed reader, the audience, is described as belonging to social groups that take care of these matters, the public elite.

In line with this focus on a privileged readership, most of the works strongly emphasized the didactical value of the newspaper, especially for younger members of the social elites. It was the dissemination outside of these elites that troubled contemporary thinkers given that public affairs were not to be discussed beyond these circles. Mere curiosity was not acceptable in the case of private groups. The handwritten newspaper was

17 Ludewig 1705, § 4.

hardly mentioned in this debate, the assumption being that its high price made it inaccessible to anyone beyond its elite audience. These newspapers were rather perceived as an internal medium, publishing news on public affairs for members of social elites who were the only people who could afford to buy them. It was thus the public display of handwritten newspapers in coffee houses that triggered general prohibitions in the 18th century.¹⁸

The handwritten newspaper – as had long been the case with the printed newspaper – was thus a socially embedded medium addressed to a public consisting of social groups holding public office. Social embeddedness and publicness are thus by no means a contradiction in terms, as it might appear from the perspective of modern society in which publicness as an abstract idea by definition encompasses all social groups. This notion does not make much sense with regard to early modern times, however, when there was no such thing as an abstract public sphere or a single society. The number of available handwritten *and* printed newspapers, their rather limited runs, and the high demands for literacy among their readers reduced the reading public to a very small elite. In any case, publicity was scarcely more than a theoretical option up until the 18th century, possibly achieved in cities such Hamburg and Amsterdam with their wide variety of almost daily publications. Even so, it is not clear what interest artisans would have had in handwritten newspapers, which did not report on their life-world or on local affairs.

Contemporaneity and participation

Newspapers, printed as well as handwritten, were about participation in an elite culture. The reader marked his or her belonging to this social elite by learning about on-going history at the same time as other members, in other words the public. This novel, “simultaneous” (depending on the speed and reliability of the postal services) participation in an elite culture gave rise to something like contemporaneity, which stretched over most parts of Europe.¹⁹ It created a new mental map for those who learned about changes in all of the known world at the same time as other members of public elites did.²⁰

This contemporaneity and participation demanded of the public elites a variety of news contacts and media forms. Handwritten newspapers were read among friends alongside printed newspapers, particular news-sheets and correspondence. All these different media served specific purposes and should be understood as fostering a more or less diversified news consumption. In that respect, the variety of news sources depended

18 Droste 2011.

19 Dooley (ed.) 2010.

20 Zsuzsa Barbarics-Hermanik has worked on early 16th-century newspapers, which were circulated within networks as a means of transcultural communication in the Ottoman Empire; Barbarics-Hermanik 2010; 2011.

specifically on the readers' social status, literacy, economic means and place of residence (preferably at or close to one of rather few news nodes).²¹

Most studies on news, however, are limited to one genre, generally the printed newspaper although early modern writings are clear about the need to engage in different news forms. What is more, engaging in news did not merely entail passive consumption.²² It was a marker for the reader's resources in that it demanded active news exchange, which in turn created and strengthened social structures. These social structures were the fabric of institutionalization processes in early modern times:

The flow of correspondence that was mediated by the postal network, was a key to the integration of large scale economic and political institutional projects that increasingly had an impact on the everyday life in the communities. In itself, the postal network provided the correspondence networks, that transformed the mechanisms of social networks within a local environment and face-to-face relation such as trust, reputation, reciprocity, into the "virtual communities" that were taking shape as correspondence networks.²³

This still seems to be an appropriate description of contemporary societies. What has changed since early modern times is the definition of publicness and society. Extending the outreach of handwritten newspapers, it turned the genre into a medium for rather small, marginalized social groups instead of social and public elites. However, this process is still not sufficiently understood. Did the handwritten newspaper lose its grip on elites? Was it eventually marginalized by censorship? Did the modern idea of one society de-legitimize a medium that was not meant to serve a socially diversified public?

The market for news

There is another difference that needs to be explained. Up until the 18th century, the handwritten newspaper was not only a means of social exchange, it was also a commodity, part of a news market that followed the economic rationale of the social groups that were engaged in it. It was, to some extent, a money-based economy in that news was a commodity that could be traded for money. The price of this commodity was about ten times higher than that of the printed newspaper. In that respect, the latter was obviously a legitimate offspring, although it by no means ended the need for handwritten versions. On the contrary, it seems as if the market for handwritten newspapers grew in the 17th and early 18th centuries alongside that for printed newspapers. They were regular market products, openly sold to customers who could afford them. They were censored and were considered part of the news market just like the printed newspaper.

21 Cf. Lamal, forthcoming, presenting a study on handwritten newspapers in 16th-century Italy.

22 Droste 2018.

23 Simonson 2009, 385.

It is problematic for researchers to describe the financial conditions of this business, and even more so with regard to its traders. There are far too few account records from news agents to make general statements on the profitability of this business.²⁴ It is known what the cost of a subscription to a handwritten newspaper was in the 17th and 18th centuries. They were obviously sold in major merchant cities, post offices, and other places. However, nothing is known about the run, which might have fluctuated heavily given there was nothing like an original.

This market for newspapers, handwritten as well as printed, did not alter the rules of socially embedded news exchange. It was still an aspect of social relations, in that investment in news fostered social relations and generated credit, and was thus mutually beneficial. It was – in a way – part of business without necessarily being business in itself. It seems as if news was – as it still is – less of a commodity and more of an investment in trust and mutual benefit. The exchange of news was therefore one way of developing social relationships and networks among court members, scholars²⁵, priests, and women²⁶. In light of the social embeddedness of news as well as newspapers, one has to look for a different economy, one that is based on social resources and extends far beyond the public news market. One should think of resources in terms of trust, networks, and the ability to communicate with absent friends at a time when social contacts primarily focused on presence. Early modern institutionalization processes, foremost among them being the state-building process, were based on a social fabric of family, friends, and networks. These social institutions and their terms were described in a flood of treatises and educational writings.

The history of the handwritten newspaper as a commodity

It is claimed that handwritten newspapers started with news exchanged among merchants as part of their mutual correspondence.²⁷ They belonged to the world of internationally active merchants with an interest in events happening at other places that might affect their trade. This notion about their origins serves to justify the explanations offered by contemporaries as well as modern researchers. In fact, there is limited evidence to back this claim, apart from a few merchant archives such as the Datini²⁸, Fugger,

24 Even the very thorough studies conducted by Mario Infelise on handwritten newspapers in Italy do not pinpoint the income that the newspaper services generated, not least because there is very little information on news traders and their different business interests; Infelise 2010, 52. Lore Sporhan-Krempel showed in her study on Georg Forstenheuser, Nürnberg's most renowned news agent, that the news trade was part of a varied and probably far more profitable business; Sporhan-Krempel 1970.

25 Greengrass, Leslie & Raylor (eds) 1994; Bots & Waquet (eds) 1994; Stegeman 2005.

26 Pal 2012.

27 Werner 1975.

28 Origo 1957.

and Veckinchusen²⁹. Nevertheless the assumption has merit, although the focus of the news frequently seemed to be the “world” and the “present day”, instead of the particular interests of the participants. It looks as if there was similar news exchange between German courts, at least from the 16th century onwards.³⁰

Another explanation for the origins of the periodical distribution of news as a commodity lies in Italy and the early diplomacy of Italian city states.³¹ It may be that there were two different beginnings, the spheres of international commerce and international diplomacy. Given that much of the “diplomatic” news was still sent by merchants even in the 17th century,³² these two explanations could be two sides of the same coin. There is as yet, however, too little evidence to resolve the issue. In any case, it is evident that handwritten and – later on – printed newspapers were mainly restricted to merchant cities, which also harbored the main postal offices that, in turn, formed the grid of an expanding European news market.³³ Contemporary writing therefore referred to merchants as *custodes novellarum*,³⁴ newspapers’ protectors, although it is not clear if this refers to the merchants’ role as producers and/or consumers. The label seemed to need no further explanation and was obviously widely accepted.

We therefore have to come back to the question of definition. What is it that distinguished the handwritten newspaper from a handwritten news-sheet or a letter of correspondence sent in a mutual news relationship? Although the printed newspaper with an (often changing) title, numbering, and periodicity is an easily identifiable product, both the letter of correspondence and the handwritten newspaper shared a number of typical markers. They were handwritten, often short and anonymous, lacked a title (although they usually had a headline stating the place and day of issue), and were periodical – according to the rhythm of the postal services. Few contemporary discussions about the handwritten newspaper survive. It was apparently considered a specific product. However, it was not taken as seriously as the printed newspaper, which after about half a century into its existence caused a rising tide of critical discourse on its use, lack of usefulness, supposed as well as legitimate readership, and quality. This discussion might serve as a reminder that our – researchers’ – focus on newspaper content is misleading. Handwritten newspapers have always been a medium for social exchange and cohesion, and internal communication, and in that way they are both public and private.

Change happened when the need for social cohesion came up against the concept of a nation-state and politics that, unlike early modern

29 Lindemann 1978.

30 Kleinpaul 1930.

31 Mattingly 1955; Infelise 2010; Zwierlein (2006) attempts to show that early modern newspapers derive from diplomatic sources, in Italy.

32 Cf. the study by Droste 2018.

33 Behringer 2010, 51; Cowan 2007; Raymond & Moxham (eds) 2016.

34 Weise 1676, Chapter 1, folio A r. The term was used by Jürgen Habermas (1989, 20) to highlight the importance of economic change in explaining the change in public debate.

This book is the first edited volume focusing on handwritten newspapers as an alternative medium from a wide interdisciplinary and international perspective. The primary focus is on handwritten newspapers as a social practice. The case studies contextualize the source materials in relation to political, cultural, literary, and economic history. The analysis reveals both continuity and change across the different forms and functions of the textual materials. The time span ranges from the 16th to the 20th century. During these centuries, handwritten newspapers changed from an expensive public commodity and a social gift for the elites to an internal or clandestine medium of communication for non-elite groups. The book targets researchers and students in media and literary history, and cultural and literacy studies.

The editors of *Handwritten Newspapers* are Heiko Droste, Professor of History at Stockholm University and Kirsti Salmi-Niklander, Senior Lecturer in Folklore Studies at University of Helsinki.



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