

# The first newspapers

Newspaper development can be seen in three phases: first, the sporadic forerunners, gradually moving toward regular publication; second, more or less regular journals but liable to suppression and subject to censorship and licensing; and, third, a phase in which direct censorship was abandoned but attempts at control continued through taxation, bribery, and prosecution. Thereafter, some degree of independence has followed.

## Commercial newsletters in continental Europe

The newsletter had been accepted as a conventional form of correspondence between officials or friends in Roman times, and in the late Middle Ages newsletters between the important trading families began to cross frontiers regularly. One family, the Fuggers, were owners of an important financial house in the German city of Augsburg; their regular newsletters were well-known even to outsiders. Traders' newsletters contained commercial information on the availability and prices of various goods and services, but they also could include political news, just as the contemporary financial editor must consider the broader sweep of events likely to influence economic transactions. The commercial newsletter thus became the first vehicle of "serious" news, with its attempt at regular, frequent publication and concern with topical events generally.

The newsletter usually accorded primacy as a definite newspaper is the Relation of Strasbourg, first printed in 1609 by Johann Carolus. A close rival is the Avis Relation oder Zeitung (Zeitung is the German word for “newspaper”), founded in the same year by Heinrich Julius, duke of Brunswick-Wolfenbuttel. In 1605, in the Low Countries, Abraham Verhoeven of Antwerp had begun publication of the Nieuwe Tijdingen (“New Tidings”), although the earliest surviving copy is dated 1621. In any case, this historical rivalry is evidence of a fairly sudden demand for newspapers at the start of the 17th century, and the continuous publication of the Nieuwe Tijdingen indicates that this demand soon became well-established. Although these publications were emerging throughout western Europe, it was the Dutch, with their advantageous geographical and trading position, who pioneered the international coverage of news through their corantos, or “current news.” The Courante uyt Italien, Duytsland, &c. (“News from Italy, Germany, and Elsewhere”) began to appear weekly or twice-weekly in 1618.

Similar rudimentary newspapers soon appeared in other European countries: Switzerland (1610), the Habsburg domains in central Europe (1620), England (1621), France (1631), Denmark (1634), Italy (1636), Sweden (1645), and Poland (1661). English and French translations of Dutch corantos were also available. But signs of official intolerance emerged fairly soon, and censorship stifled newspaper development in the late 17th century and into the 18th century in continental Europe. In Paris in 1631, the Nouvelles Ordinaires de Divers Endroits (“Common News from Many Places”), a publishing venture by the booksellers Louis Vendosme and Jean Martin, was immediately replaced by an officially authorized publication, La Gazette, published under the name of Théophraste Renaudot but with influential backing by Cardinal de Richelieu. The new

publication was to continue (as *La Gazette de France*) until 1917, casting the shadow of authority over nonofficial newspapers throughout its life. The first French daily—*Le Journal de Paris*—was not started until 1777; and although the Revolution of 1789 brought a temporary upsurge in newspaper publishing, with 350 papers being issued in Paris alone, the return to monarchy brought another clampdown. Napoleon I had his own official organ—*Le Moniteur Universel*, first published by Charles-Joseph Panckoucke (one of a family of booksellers and writers) in 1789 and lasting until 1869—and during his reign there were only three other French newspapers.

In Germany, early newsletter development was soon hampered by the Thirty Years' War (1618–48), with its restrictions on trade, shortage of paper, and strict censorship. Even in peacetime censorship and parochialism inhibited the German press. Among the important regional newspapers were the *Augsburger Zeitung* (1689), the *Vossische Zeitung* in Berlin (1705), and the *Hamburgische Correspondent* (1714). In Austria the *Wiener Zeitung* was started in 1703 and is considered to be the oldest surviving daily newspaper in the world. The oldest continuously published weekly paper was the official Swedish gazette, the *Post-och Inrikes Tidningar*; begun in 1645, it adopted an Internet-only format in 2007. Sweden is also notable for having introduced the first law (in 1766) guaranteeing freedom of the press, but the concept of an independent press barely existed in most of Europe until the middle of the 19th century, and until then publishers were constantly subject to state authority.

# Early newspapers in Britain and America

## Britain

The British press made its debut—an inauspicious one—in the early 17th century. News coverage was restricted to foreign affairs for a long time, and even the first so-called English newspaper was a translation by Nathaniel Butter, a printer, of a Dutch coranto called *Corante, or newes from Italy, Germany, Hungarie, Spaine and France*, dated September 24, 1621. Together with two London stationers, Nicholas Bourne and Thomas Archer, Butter published a stream of corantos and avisos (Spanish: “warnings” or “announcements”), including a numbered and dated series of *Weekley Newes*, beginning in 1622. But a number of difficulties confronted a prospective publisher: a license to publish was needed; regular censorship of reporting was in operation from the earliest days; and foreign news no longer appeared because of a decree by the Court of the Star Chamber (in force from 1632 to 1638) completely banning the publication of accounts of the Thirty Years’ War.

## North America

In North America, publication of newspapers was deterred during colonial times by the long arm of the British law, but after independence the United States could boast one of the world’s least restrictive sets of laws on publication. A first attempt at publishing, albeit abortive, was made in Boston by a radical from London, Benjamin Harris, in 1690. His *Publick Occurrences, Both Foreign and*

Domestick, intended as a monthly series, was immediately stopped by the governor of Massachusetts. It was clear that free speech and a nonofficial press were not to be tolerated in the colonies. Boston was also the site of the first official newspaper, The Boston News-Letter (1704), with which the authorities replaced the proclamations, pamphlets, and newsletters previously used to convey news from London. In 1719 the original title was replaced by the Boston Gazette, printed by Benjamin Franklin's elder brother, James, who soon produced the first independent American newspaper, the New-England Courant of 1721. William Bradford founded the first New York City newspaper, the New-York Gazette, in 1725, and his son Andrew was the first newspaper proprietor in Philadelphia. Further expansion of the colonies created 37 different titles by the outbreak of the American Revolution.