

NICHOLAS BROWNLEES

THE CONCEPT OF PERIODICITY IN ENGLISH PAMPHLET NEWS

1. *Introduction*

In the history of the English press the year 1622 marks a defining moment. In the summer of that year we see the first hesitant steps towards a non-serialised periodical recount of news while in the autumn serialised, periodical print news had its beginnings. On 15 October 1622 the London publishers Nathaniel Butter and Nicholas Bourne brought out the first number of a series made up of fifty separate publications that when possible, and when convenient, came out on a more or less weekly basis. These publications, which contained only foreign news, were in the form of quarto-sized pamphlets amounting initially to 24 pages.¹ They contained multiple news stories and dispatches, unlike the occasional news pamphlets which had begun publication soon after the invention of the printing press but which generally focused on a single news story and had no periodicity.²

Serialised news became a recognized feature of London life and, with the exception of the six year period between 1632-1638 when Charles I had them banned, they provided foreign news on a regular, if not exactly periodical, basis up until 1641. That year saw the publication of the first weekly news pam-

¹ Apart from a few exceptions, when they were longer, corantos were generally 24 pages until 1626 after which they were reduced to 16 pages until they were banned for six years in 1632.

² H. Ettinghausen, *How the Press Began. The Pre-Periodical Printed News in Early Modern Europe*, «Janus», 3 (2015), p. 11.

phlets containing domestic news, and with their advent news publications containing just foreign news quickly disappeared. 1641-1665 marked the high point of serialized news pamphlets as they reported – now on a much more fixed periodical basis than previously – some of the most momentous events of British history: the Civil Wars of the 1640s, the execution of Charles I in 1649, the Commonwealth and Cromwell's Protectorate of the 1650s, the Restoration and its immediate aftermath. Periodical news pamphlets – as distinct from periodical journals and review journals which had their heyday in the eighteenth century – came to an end in 1665 with the founding of the *Oxford Gazette* (that became the *London Gazette* in 1666). The *Gazette*, that was to remain the preeminent periodical news publication up until the lapse of the Licensing act in 1695, consisted of a small folio sheet with two columns of news on each side of the two pages. Described as «very pretty» by Samuel Pepys,³ the neatly organized format of the *Gazette* proved a model for numerous successive periodical news publications. In format and regularity of publication it can be considered a prototype newspaper, and, indeed, the first attested use of the term 'newspaper' is in 1667, shortly after the founding of the *Gazette*.

Since the founding of the *Gazette* marks the demise of periodical news pamphlets, in my paper I shall focus on the period from 1622 (the beginnings of periodical print news and the serialised press) to 1665. In this time range I shall examine the concept of periodicity with particular reference to how the concept was construed by news publishers and writers and what periodicity meant for the readers' understanding and reception of news.

³ S. Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: A New and Complete Transcription*, in R. Latham and W. Matthews (eds.), HarperCollins, London 1970-1983, vol. 6, p. 305.

2. *Periodical pamphlet news 1622-1665*

There is no doubt that the publishers of the news pamphlets series between the autumn of 1622 and October 1632 (when they were banned by Charles I through order of the Star Chamber) were very keen to emphasise the periodicity of their publications.⁴ This is exemplified in different ways, the first being the name that was given to the publications themselves. Although contemporaries frequently referred to these foreign news periodical pamphlets as ‘currant’, ‘corrante’ (or in modern day parlance ‘coranto’) this was not the name that was found on the title-page of the publications. Over the ten-year period between 1622-1632, the term most frequently used on the title-page in reference to the publication was ‘Continuation’.⁵ Often found between October 1622 and the summer of 1624 (e.g. *A continuation of the news of this present weeke*, 5 November 1622), *The continuation of the former newes*, 21 November 1622), it became more or less the fixed name from September 1624 until the imposition of the ban in 1632. In those years we not only find publications entitled the ‘continuation of news’ but the *The continuation of our weekly avisoes* (12 January 1632), *The continuation of our forraine avisoes* (12 October 1632) and *The continuation of our forraine intelligence* (8 February 1632). The title page would be headed by an expression containing ‘Continuation’ and below that there would be a brief summary of the principle news stories contained in the pamphlet.

⁴ J. Boys, *London's News Press and the Thirty Years War*, Boydell Press, Woodbridge 2011, pp. 227-228. Boys explains that the ban resulted from Charles I's desire to mollify Spain after anti-Spanish news had recently appeared in the corantos. However, apart from this, it is possible that Gustavus Adolphus's enthusiastically reported victories over Imperial forces in late 1631 and 1632 were considered threatening to the English court since these military successes could not but be compared with the unpopular passivity of Charles I's foreign policy. For this view see N. Brownlees, *The Language of Periodical News in Seventeenth-Century England*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle-upon-Tyne 2014 [2011], p. 88.

⁵ See the ground-breaking bibliography of English corantos by F. Dahl, *A Bibliography of English Corantos 1620-1642*, The Bibliographical Society, London 1952.

Through the reference to ‘continuation’, news publishers of corantos undoubtedly wanted to stress the periodicity of their publications.⁶ They must have regarded this as enhancing the value of the news. Indeed, the periodicity is not only underlined in the metatextual term ‘continuation’ but also in the information prominently placed at the top of the title-page regarding the publication’s number in the series.

The extent to which the London publishers must have concurred with Andrew Pettegree’s observation that periodicity «involved a total redefinition of the concept of news» is also seen in the way in which periodicity was invoked by the news editor as a guiding principle in the writing up of news in these early periodical news pamphlets.⁷ We see this very clearly in the first extant pamphlet of 1622 to include the word ‘Continuation’ on the title-page in reference to the published news.⁸ The pamphlet was published on 13 June 1622, four months before serialised news pamphlets were introduced, but, as the following address to the reader shows, in the publisher’s eyes the periodical press had not only already begun but had also led to a new way of recounting news.

Wee therefore knowing all men desirous of newes, be it either good or bad, haue purposed (so farre as the power of Authoritie shall licence us) to publish the weekly occurrences which come to our hands [...] And in the Continuation, though wee cannot hope to make euery reader beleeuue what we write, yet neuerthesse we will not publish any thing, but either from a sure hand, or some relation, seconded and confirmed by others: [...] Wee write a continuation, that you may see by the proceedings, that there is good dependancy betweene the relations, wherein we purpose to keepe nere to the Lawes of Historie, to guesse at the reasons of the actions by the most apparant presumptions, and to set downe the true names and distances of places, and

⁶ A. Pettegree, Review of *London’s News Press and the Thirty Years War*, by J. E.E. Boys and *Selling Cromwell’s Wars: Media, Empire and Godly Warfare, 1650-1658*, by N. Greenspan, «English Historical Review», 128 (2013), pp. 1231-1232.

⁷ A. Pettegree, *The Invention of News: How the World Came to Know about Itself*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2014, p. 365.

⁸ Dahl does not include the below-mentioned coranto of 13 June 1622 but does refer to the lost pamphlet of 10 June 1622 which was registered in the Stationer’s Office as «The continuation of more newes from the Palatinate Relating to the taking of the Lantgraue [...]», *A Bibliography of English Corantos*, p. 64.

times, that you may perceiue, there is probability in the seuerall Atchieuements. [...] This we thought good to tell you of: That you may vnderstand what you buy, and thus wee bid you farewell.⁹
 (A continuation of more newes from the Palatinate, 13 June 1622)

In this landmark editorial address the writer goes into some detail as to what selecting and narrating news means in the proposed weekly publication. Readers are told of the publishers' intention to provide a weekly publication containing accurate, impartial reporting based on a careful selection from reliable news sources, where the news will be recounted in the form of a «continuation». The continuation refers not just to the periodicity of the publication but also to the way the news is told.

An example of this style of presenting news is seen below:

May it please you next then to turne backe an eye vnto *Bethlem Gabor*, of whom much hath beene expected, and little performed; whose preparations, though they haue not alwayes answered the reports that went of him; yet wee beleeeue now, that wee hauing this weeke the Relations of *Regenspurg* whole and entire, where by reason of the concourse from all parts, all the certainest Newes is stirring; that these reports are for the substance very certaine. Wee tould you in our last Newes Printed the fifth of *October*, That *Bethlem Gabor* had sent an Ambassadour to the Prince of *Oranges Campe* [...] This aide euery man may guesse, that the *Turke* will not yet grant against the Emperour, so long as he sues to him for Peace; neither is he likely to deny it peremptorily, till he heares the answer of the Imperiall Dyet.
 (A continuation of the newes of this present weeke, 16 November 1622)

This concerted attempt to provide a continuous news narrative to match the “continuation” of publication lasted between the summers of 1622 and 1624. During this time we often see the editor, Thomas Gainsford, trying to collate and interpret for the benefit of the reader all the various news items arriving from variegated news sources.¹⁰ However, following Gainsford's death in the summer of 1624, the continuous news narrative was

⁹ The publisher's explicit recognition of the periodicity of his non-serialised news publication supports the view that in the history of the European periodical press it is mistaken to limit periodicity to serialised news. For this see C. Espejo and F. Baena, *A Critique of Periodicity in Early Modern Journalism. The First Spanish Serial Gazette: Gazeta de Roma in Valencia (1618-1620)*, «European Review», 23 (2015), pp. 341-353.

¹⁰ Brownlees, *The Language of Periodical News*, pp. 55-65.

abandoned in favour of a form of news presentation which was prevalent on the European continent. This model of textual organization consisted of a succession of news dispatches introduced by a dateline providing the barest of information relating to the source of news. There is no attempt to collate or ‘muster’ the news so as to present a more coherent account of the latest events.¹¹ The dispatches and reports relating to a single story or place might be put in different parts of the coranto with no explicit editorial intervention connecting the related reports which, indeed, could contradict one another.

In the absence of editorial guidance, the reader had the task of interpreting the news in the periodical press for themselves. As Raymond writes, corantos relied on «very active interpretation by the reader».¹² The only editorial assistance comes in the form of the brief contents summaries on the title-pages of corantos. These summaries, which also had the communicative objective of attracting readers to buy the pamphlet in question, are found on all the title-pages of corantos between 1622-1632. When corantos recommenced publication in December 1638, publishers initially dispensed with title-pages but reintroduced them, and the brief contents summaries, in April 1640 when the coranto format returned to 16 pages as opposed to 4 pages from December 1638-April 1640. This 16-page format including the title-page continued from April 1640 until the demise of serialised corantos at the end of 1641.

The advent of serialised newsbooks, as historians often call the periodical news pamphlets that contained both domestic and foreign news between 1642-1665, saw various significant changes regarding the pamphlets’ frequency of publication, naming and formatting. In general, newsbooks came out on fixed days of the week, had specific names (such as *Mercurius*

¹¹ The term muster is found in *A true relation of the affairs of Europe*, 4 October 1622: «I begin with Naples, because as neere as I can I will come orderly forward with the Prouinces as they lye, and in regards the seuerall Letters beare not one date, I haue thought good to Muster the Newes, which belongs to the same place, as it were into one Armie, and so you shall receiue the occurrences altogether».

¹² J. Raymond, *News Writing*, in A. Hadfield (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of English Prose 1500-1640*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 410.

Aulicus, *The Kingdomes Weekly Intelligencer*, *Mercurius Politicus*) and did without title-pages. Some of the many newsbooks which were founded during the early 1640s, in conjunction with the Civil War, provided a continuous news narrative similar to that first adopted between 1622-1624. Such publications included *Mercurius Aulicus* and *Mercurius Britannicus*, which being the mouthpieces of respectively the royalists and parliamentarians adopted a clear, editorially-mediated mode of reporting to render their periodical news as clear as possible. They wanted to ensure that their highly selective, ideologically-entrenched reporting of news, which often transgressed into blatant propaganda, was immediately comprehensible. They adopted a narrative style that linked up stories from one week to the next, thereby reflecting in their narration the periodicity of publication.

SUNDAY. July 7.

Having told you last weeke of the Rebels progresse against the gentry of this Kingdome, in imprisoning their Persons, pillaging their Houses, cutting downe their woods, and at last unturfing the very earth it selfe, (the lowest they can goe, till they come into their place.) We must now acquaint you that these insatiate Rebels having devoured all the profit, are now grasping at the severall Honours belonging to these Revenues. For which purpose they passed an Ordinance on Monday last, that Stewards of Courts may be forthwith appointed in such Lordships and Manors as belong unto Delinquents, that hereafter all Courts may be kept in their Names, who by Ordinance of Parliament enjoy the Sequestrations. So, it is not sufficient to seize your estate, and take your life, unlesse also your name be expunged, that none may know hereafter that any such men lived in the world.

(*Mercurius Aulicus*, 13 July 1644)

However, in the large majority of periodical newsbooks the reporting of news, especially foreign news, lacks editorial intervention and guidance. Stories are instead reported by means of unconnected reports, derived from varied news sources, frequently presenting multiple often contrasting angles and interpretations of the same event. Hence, although periodical in frequency, the news presented in the newsbooks, as indeed in the serialised corantos which aimed at coming out periodically, would not always have been easy to understand – anything but.

Through weekly publication, publishers underlined the continuous flow of news but the manner in which news itself was written up was discontinuous. The news was 'discontinuous' in the sense that there was little editorial attempt to collate different pieces of news from different sources into a composite picture. There was editorial selection of news but the news selected was presented in a basically discontinuous, motley way.¹³

In periodical news one week you would find several pieces of news about a particular event, the next week there would be nothing about it, then the week after the topic would once more be reintroduced but there would probably be little editorial effort to connect the various strands of news. In that sense news reporting was discontinuous.

This meant that for the 'continuous' news to be understood, you, the reader, had to go back to the past, to back numbers. That is, reading news as history, as events unfolded during the year. There was a temporal, historical framework for the understanding of news. Very different from now where news is consumed on a daily, if not hourly basis. Nelson and Seccombe write that through the serialisation of news «the publisher implied to the purchaser that serially-issued news was valuable not only when published but also in the future, as successive chapters in a historical chronicle».¹⁴ The serialisation of news had ramifications for the reading and cognition process of news. Editors themselves realised the need to consult past issues.

For example, there was an important naval battle in Italy, just off Livorno (or Leghorn as the English called it), in March 1653 between the English and Dutch. Information leading up to the battle, and the battle itself, was reported in the principal news publication of the day, *Mercurius Politicus*. However, as the editor himself recognised regarding the reporting of a preceding

¹³ For factors influencing the editorial selection of news from the Civil Wars to the Restoration, see J. Peacey, *Editing and Editorial Interventions in English Journalism from the Civil Wars to the Restoration*, «Media History», 18 (2012), pp. 259-273.

¹⁴ C. Nelson and M. Seccombe. *Periodical Publications 1641-1700*, The Bibliographical Society, London 1986, p. 27.

minor naval encounter which had been won by the British, there were problems in the reporting:

In regard my materials are not so punctuall as were necessary for the making up of an intire exact Relation according to the dignity of the subiect, in all the Particulars; therefore, you must take things as they come represented in parcells from severall hands; which being added to what was published in the last, you may by collecting all together, have a sight (in some measure) of the late successe and Victory.

(*Mercurius Politicus*, 3 March 1653)

This metatextual comment is very important. The editor is admitting that as his news sources were not precise enough to let him write a complete report of the event the readers must make use of the different accounts which, together with the news found in the previous week's publication, would give them an idea, or at least some idea, of the recent British success and victory.

There is the recognition in the news writer's last words in the above passage that the provision and understanding of news is anything but simple: «you may by collecting all together, have a sight (in some measure) of the late successe and Victory». The problem for readers was that although news was continuous it was not always easy for them to understand what all this continuous news was about.

Similar editorial invitations to readers to consult back numbers so as to better understand news are also found in the coranto of 4 December 1640 and on 3 August 1632. In 1640 the editor writes: «The continuation of our two last weeks printed newes from forraigne parts, (being *Num.* 44. 45.) by reading whereof, you may better understand this present weeks aviso», while in 1632, in number 38 of the series, the editor suggests readers should consult numbers 31 and 32 of the series when reading the letters of the present week's publication: « If the reader please to compare them together, you shall find *Henry* of the *Bergh* his letters and declaration, printed in our *aviso* of *June*, the 30. *numb.* 31. and *July* 6. *Numb.* 32. »¹⁵ In this latter

¹⁵ The respective corantos are *Cent. 3. Num. 46. The continuation of our last two weeks printed newes from forraigne parts* (4 December 1640) and

case the editor is presuming that readers have kept back numbers of 5 and 6 weeks earlier. As one 1640s editor wrote : «Truth is the daughter of Time [...] the truth does not so conspicuously appear till a second or third relation».¹⁶

Readers of periodical news were not only encouraged to keep back numbers, and hence in the process buy every number in the series, but publishers did what they could to facilitate the binding of the newsbooks at the end of series.¹⁷ With the 1640s newsbooks this often included continuous pagination and continuous signing. It is not possible to know how frequently newsbook series were bound, but when they were the readers would consult the news in the bound edition in the same way as they would consult recent historical events. Periodical news was being read as history.

Conclusions

In this paper I have examined features of narration and reception in early English periodical pamphlet news. For the purposes of this study I have understood 'periodical' as inclusive of those publications which although not serialised were regarded as periodical by the publisher in his address to the readers. In this respect I have understood English periodical pamphlet news as beginning in the summer of 1622. As we have seen, and as Table 1 shows, the form and narrative style of periodical news changed many times over the four decades between the beginnings of periodical pamphlet news in 1622 and its demise with the founding of the small folio «Oxford Gazette» in 1665.

August. 3. Numb. 38. Advice given unto the States of of (sic) the Low-Countries (3 August 1632).

¹⁶ J. Raymond, *Exporting Impartiality*, in K. Murphy and A. Traninger (eds.), *The Emergence of Impartiality*, Brill, Leiden 2014, p. 164.

¹⁷ Nelson and Seccombe, *Periodical Publications*, p. 27.

Date	Form of periodicity	Narrating periodical news
1622 (June – October)	Non-serialised but intended weekly publication	Summarising contents on title-page Mostly unconnected dispatches
1622 (October) – July 1624 (July)	Serialised and intended weekly publication	Summarising contents on title-page Much continuous news narrative
1624 (September) – 1632 (October)	Serialised and intended weekly publication	Summarising contents on title-page Mostly unconnected dispatches
1632 October – 1638 December	Corantos banned	
1638 (December) – 1640 (March)	Serialised, but no fixed periodicity	No title-page Mostly unconnected dispatches
1640 (April) – 1641 (December)	Serialised and intended weekly publication	Summarising contents on title-page Mostly unconnected dispatches
1642 – 1665	Serialised and weekly publication	No title-page Continuous news narrative often in domestic news Mostly unconnected dispatches in foreign news

Table 1: English periodical pamphlet news 1622-1665

Although the four decades witnessed a movement from non-serialised, intended periodical news to serialised, regular periodical news the direction which this movement took was anything but linear. Likewise jagged was the narrative style adopted in the recounting of the news. The fact that news pamphlets became serialised and periodical in publication did not lead to a consistent attempt by the news writer to frame the writing of news within a periodical framework. During the four decades much of the continuous news was written in a discontinuous

style in the sense that writers made little attempt to link the news in one week's publication to what had been written in previous numbers. The fact that this mode of news narration made the understanding of news more difficult for readers is recognized in various editorial addresses to readers in which editors advise their readership to refer to back numbers of the publication so as to understand the unfolding news better.

This recognition of the importance of back numbers, and referring back to the past to understand the present, is also seen in the efforts publishers made to facilitate the binding of their pamphlets. Publishers wished their news to be read as historical annual accounts just as much as weekly updates. Seventeenth-century periodical pamphlet news in England was predicated on the epistemological premise that the present could only be fully understood by reading the past.