

Tatler and Spectator

Having access to a wealth of international news is something that we today take for granted, given the profusion of newspapers, television channels and Internet sites we have at our fingertips. The modern newsreader can be aware of events happening in any part of the world should he choose to find out, among a selection of accompanying opinions and commentaries that run to his taste. Through this availability the modern reader gains an expansive kind of international consciousness, while at the same time settling himself into a niche based on political orientation and social attitude. It is surprising then to find the same phenomena existing at the beginning of the 18th Century, where a modern commercial society was just beginning to develop in Britain. Contemporary wars and politics were tracked assiduously by a huge and literate urban populace, who acted not as passive receptors of information but energetic (albeit ineffectual, if Addison is to be believed) commentators, filling the coffee shops with discussions of topics they would never have any direct experience with. The Tatler's articles cast scorn on this trend in society, but the periodical also contributed to it with its political reporting¹ and popularity in the period.

The period of the Tatler and the Spectator was the dawn of the modern news market.

While both periodicals were not primarily newspapers, many others were mentioned which did serve that purpose. Their numbers could only be a sign that publishers found an audience

¹ Erin Mackie, "Introduction: Cultural and Historical Background" in Joseph Addison and Richard Steele [et al.], *The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from the Tatler and the Spectator*, Erin Mackie, ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), 1-5.

which both desired and was capable of financially supporting the market. The paupered upholster mentioned in the *Tatler* was one such newsreader who could only be described as obsessive, and while he should not be taken as a representative member of the middle class, Addison's account did show the existence of a significant number of people who lived "more in a Coffee-house than in their Shops."² Judging from the names mentioned in the article, the upholsterer and his neighbors had access not just to Tory and Whig papers, but also periodicals which covered French, Dutch and Russian affairs. It is uncertain whether they are local publications or delivered from abroad, but since Addison describes them as "from Muscovy" or having "come in[to town]", the latter is a definite possibility. This international awareness indicates a tremendously expanded public consciousness – not just in the sense of the amount of information that an average citizen can obtain, but also of diplomatic rumors and military maneuvers, which was previously in the sole province of rulers and generals. The amount of information available was not just taken advantage of in terms of its relevance to the reader's private life. As Addison noted, it had transformed uneducated tradesmen into armchair politicians and diplomats.

This was not in Addison's view a welcome development. The moral of the upholsterer's story made this plain enough: the man in question paid more attention to distant foreign monarchs than his own livelihood, abdicating the responsibility to sustain his family

² Joseph Addison, ["Addison on the Political Upholsterer Addicted to News"], *Tatler* No. 155 (Thursday, April 6, 1710) in Joseph Addison and Richard Steele [et al.], *The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from the Tatler and the Spectator*, Erin Mackie, ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998), 58-61.

and ending up as some sort of tramp who poignantly asks the narrator for a loan even when his passion for news remained undiminished. Admittedly, the article is somewhat anecdotal in describing the upholsterer's descent, with the narrator meeting him once as a craftsman and then as a pauper, with little description of what transpired between the two encounters and therefore little evidence of whether the man's addiction led to his ruin. Nevertheless, Addison makes the story compelling enough even as a parable, and it does not invalidate the upholsterer's specific excesses. Following the news exhaustively was a dangerously time-consuming activity, what with the multitude of papers to read and the discussions to attend. The financial outlay of such a hobby was also probably nontrivial, given that it was beyond the reach of the working classes. However a great difference in wealth existed in the middle strata of society (Mackie notes that Addison and Steele themselves belong there), and a craftsman like the upholsterer is likely to be near the lower end of the scale.

Furthermore, Addison makes many implications that an "addiction" to news was not only unwise but also inappropriate for the popular readership. As I have mentioned earlier, such information was no longer delivered to national elites for them to act on but also to the vast middle class below them who have no real voice in such affairs. It did not prevent newsreaders from making extensive and intricate projections of future events in Europe and betting money on them. In fact, Steele saw such fantasies as outright damaging, an unfamiliar

and harmful activity for the “empty” minds of the petty bourgeois.³ In becoming “far gone in as visible a Madness as [Don Quixote]”, their minds seem to inhabit the foreign countries of their obsession rather than the one they should be concerned about, an unpatriotic display as troubling as the violation of their social station. In contrast, the upper classes had the wealth and leisure to freely engage in such activities, which Addison and Steele included themselves in by dint of their profession and education. Note how the narrator kept up with the upholsterer’s questions, indicating that Addison himself was just as well-informed, if not as eager to reveal so in public.

Nevertheless, the availability of news allowed the formation of opinions beyond the cloistered circle of leadership, and information itself is a kind of power. What Addison and Steele chose not to emphasize was the less sensational news – foreign market prices, informative advertisements and other information of concrete value to the emerging middle class. Even distant battles and disasters could have had knock-on effects on daily life, as the particular commentator who linked the Turks’ removal from Europe to woolen manufacture may have realized. While the degree of obsession as depicted by the Tatler is undeniably unhealthy, it is also uncannily reminiscent of present-day interests and hobbies with similarly passionate discussions taking place on the Internet. The venue may be different, but the beginnings of modernity captured here are unmistakable.

³ Richard Steele, [“Steele on The Tatler as Antidote for News-Addiction”], *Tatler* No. 178 (Tuesday, May 30, 1710) in Joseph Addison and Richard Steele [et al.], *The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from the Tatler and the Spectator*, Erin Mackie, ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1998), 65-70.

Addison and Steele have described the fallout of a new developing mode of consciousness in 18th century Britain, where society was in the process of being turned upside down. This was only one small aspect of the commercial nature of urban Britain, the growing commodification of information of all varieties. The Tatler itself ostensibly represented a more edifying aspect of popular print, with the express purpose of opposing this pretentious gentrification of the “ordinary people”. But when viewed on the flip side, this phenomenon is the dissemination of information from high to low, precluding the formation of modern conceptions of equality and citizenship, with all its responsibilities and contradictions.

Bibliography

Addison, Joseph and Richard Steele [et al.], *The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from the Tatler and the Spectator*, Erin Mackie, ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998.