

Center *for the Study of the* American Constitution

NO. 17: ACCESS TO NEWSPAPERS: A RADICAL NEW POLICY

With the coming of the American Revolution, printers played an increasingly important role in American politics as broadsides, pamphlets, and newspapers became far more numerous. By the late 1780s approximately ninety newspapers were being published in the United States, most of them in larger towns. Newspaper printers (mostly individuals, but occasionally partnerships) were usually mere copyists; fewer than a dozen took an active role in drafting or shaping content published in their newspapers. Pseudonyms were universally used to mask the identity of authors in the printed debate. Anonymity aimed at keeping personality out of the debate, allowing readers to concentrate on issues and arguments. Anonymity also protected authors from duels, canings, mob violence, and economic, political, and social manipulation.

If most newspaper printers were mere copyists, that is not to suggest that printers felt no stake in the contest over the Constitution's ratification. Virtually all American printers supported the Constitutional Convention and urged Americans, through the types of material they printed, to accept whatever the Convention proposed. After the new Constitution was presented to the people, Americans divided sharply in the public debate over ratification. Only about six newspaper printers actively opposed the adoption of the Constitution. Another half dozen printers were neutral enough to be described as having a balanced editorial policy. The remaining newspaper printers strongly supported the Constitution despite printing Antifederalist pieces on occasion.

Less than three weeks after the promulgation of the Constitution, a controversial new editorial policy was announced in Boston, probably at the behest of Federalists who anticipated criticism of the Constitution. The new policy aimed to alter the ground rules of public debate over ratification. A correspondent in the Boston *Independent Chronicle* on 4 October launched an assault on the principle of anonymity. While all Americans had the right to publish their sentiments on the Constitution, the correspondent claimed, writers should not conceal their identity. A week later on 10 October, Benjamin Russell, the politically active printer of the Boston *Massachusetts Centinel*, announced that he would not publish a particular piece—in this case, an Antifederalist piece under the pseudonym "Lucius"—unless the writer divulged his identity to the printer. Russell asserted that other writers on the Constitution had already given him liberty to provide their names to the public on request. Russell would accept no less from "Lucius." Justice and good sense demanded such a response. Russell was concerned that pieces by potentially disingenuous writers might "deceive some" readers who supposed the pieces "to be the result of an honest enquiry of some friend to our country." Russell admonished other printers to follow his lead, and they did. Soon printers in Philadelphia and Savannah adopted similar exclusionary policies.

Debates over this policy became intense not only in these three towns, but also in other towns as well. Federalists justified the policy by charging that Antifederalists might be foreigners or former Loyalists who did not want a strong national government established, perhaps secretly favoring the return of America to Great Britain. Federalists also charged that selfish state officeholders opposed the new Constitution because they feared that positions of power and public trust—positions that they held within state governments under the Articles of Confederation—would be transferred to the federal government. If the Constitution was truly defective, Federalists also argued, Antifederalists should have no qualms in taking a public stand against these defects.

Antifederalists strenuously denounced the new editorial policy as a radical change and as a violation of the freedom of the press, which was guaranteed in most state constitutions or bills of rights. The issues, Antifederalists argued, were of paramount importance, not the names of those who raised them. For Antifederalists, the new policy served only to intimidate opponents of the Constitution. Federalists' vitriolic treatment of George Mason, Elbridge Gerry, and Edmund Randolph, the three delegates in the Constitutional Convention who refused to sign the Constitution in 17 September, formed a backdrop for Antifederalist fears. An item appearing in the *Pennsylvania Journal* on 17 October 1787 reported that town officials in Virginia greeted Mason and advised him that he "should withdraw from that town within an hour, for they could not answer for his personal safety, from an enraged populace." Writing in the *Boston Independent Chronicle* on 18 October, "Solon" argued that "A spirit of *investigation*, and a *freedom*, and *independence* of *sentiments*, should never be *checked* in a *free* country, on the most momentous occasions." "Argus," writing in the *Providence United States Chronicle*, 8 November, asked Federalists why, if the new Constitution was such a good form of government, they were "afraid to have any Thing said against it."

Soon the new editorial policy was no longer discussed, as printers did not require the names of Antifederalist authors before publishing their articles. For Antifederalists, however, the newspaper controversy, and its broader implications for the freedom of the press, was a harbinger of what might happen under the new Constitution. ■

Documents

A CITIZEN, *MASSACHUSETTS GAZETTE*, 16 OCTOBER 1787

As the New Constitution for the United States, now before the publick, is a concern of such vast importance to the freedom and happiness of our young nation, the people ought to bestow upon it the most serious attention, and also "ask wisdom of God who giveth to them who ask it,"—and as we are to expect some erroneous *friends*, as well as artful *enemies*, who will give their sentiments to the publick upon this great subject, in order to guard the people as much as possible from impositions, it seems necessary that every writer should leave his name with the Printer, that any one, who may be desirous of knowing the author, should be informed.

This appears perfectly reasonable, and is perfectly consistent with the liberty of the press. No honest man I conceive, can object to this rule, in the present very interesting concern. Every man will admit, that this period is big with importance to our country—And if foreign and domestick enemies are allowed to publish their *dark and alarming fears*, while *they are concealed*, many honest people may suppose such fears were expressed by real friends and patriots, and therefore may receive an undue impression from them.—Enemies we certainly have, who wish to prevent our growth and prosperity; and shall we at this critical day suffer them to sow the seeds of our ruin, *in the dark*?

And as to real friends, no one can rationally object to have his name known, as the author of what he publishes—therefore it is expected that every Printer, who is a true patriot, will adhere to this rule.

SOLON, *BOSTON INDEPENDENT CHRONICLE*, 18 OCTOBER 1787 (EXCERPTS)

All eyes waited, for the *bursting* forth of the *rays* of *political wisdom*, from that *illuminative body*, the *illustrious federal convention*, and it is *ardently* hoped, that every rational *American*, will *gladly* receive, *candidly* examine, *wisely* adopt, and *perseveringly* pursue, such *salutary* measures as have been planned for them, which appear *calculated* to *establish* the *United States of America*, a *Free, Independent, prosperous, and happy Nation*, *revered and respected, at home and abroad*. And such I presume will be the conduct of my enlightened fellow countrymen. . . .

The able framers of the Constitution of this Commonwealth . . . in their *address* to their *constituents*, begin, "Having had your appointment and instruction, we have undertaken the arduous task of preparing a civil Constitution for the people of Massachusetts Bay; and we now submit it to your candid consideration.—It is your *interest* to revise it with the greatest care and circumspection, and it is your undoubted *right*, either to propose such alterations and amendments as you shall judge proper, or to give it your own sanction in its present form, or totally to reject it."—And there is every

ground to evince, that the *illustrious* Convention in their *address* to the United States, *in Congress assembled*, have said every thing which *wisdom* and *propriety* could dictate.—I am aware of the delicacy of the subject, nor should I thus early have touched my pen, had it not been for some paragraphs which have appeared in the public papers, which *tend to damp* a spirit of enquiry, and a *freedom* and *independence* of sentiments, which are so *essential* to the *existence* of free Governments.

A spirit of *investigation*, and a *freedom*, and *independence* of sentiments, should never be *checked* in a *free* country, on the most momentous occasions. Hence it is, that *wise*, and *free* States, *provide* for the *liberty of the press*, as one of the *bulwarks of freedom*. It is when men *consent* to forms of Government, that they should express their sentiments respecting them . . . yet should a *spirit* of examination, and *freedom* of sentiments, be *suppressed* or *severely censured*, in our country, some *future* convention, *less wise* and *less virtuous*, may take *encouragement* therefrom to *introduce* a *monarchy*, an *aristocracy*, or a standing army, *in time of peace*, too often the *engines of despotism*, and *restringent* to the *rights* and *liberties* of mankind.—Heaven grant, that the *wisdom*, the *valour*, and the *virtue*, of the *people* of the *United States of America*, may *forever* prevent the *introduction* of *either* of them.

**A PENNSYLVANIA MECHANIC,
PHILADELPHIA INDEPENDENT GAZETTEER,
29 OCTOBER 1787 (EXCERPT)**

GENTLEMEN, I have been delighted with the noble struggle which the brave and virtuous throughout America have been, and still are, making to establish the new frame of government. I am charmed with the good sense and humanity of the people at large, who, though they are very generally warmly attached to it, yet they bear, with uncommon patience, all the insults hitherto thrown out against it, and the gentlemen of the late convention.

The friends of the new system are not ashamed to avow their principles, and their writings, on the subject, while its enemies take every prudent measure to prevent detection.

I know a gentleman in this city, high in office, who has written much against the new system, notwithstanding he has never, in company, uttered a syllable against it.

Hence I conclude that the antifederal junto are conscious of the wickedness of their proceedings—that their cause is that of the devil—and of it they are truly ashamed. It appears by a late eastern paper, that the publisher of the Massachusetts Gazette is determined to publish no sentiments on this important subject, unless the writers leave their names with the printers, “that any one who may be desirous of knowing the author, may be informed.” No honest man—no true friend to America—or to the liberty or happiness of mankind, can object to this. . . .

**PHILADELPHIA FREEMAN’S JOURNAL,
31 OCTOBER 1787 (EXCERPT)**

“ . . . Some of the Newspinters in this city, to their eternal disgrace, have refused to publish any pieces tending to examine that new code [i.e., the Constitution], unless the name of the author or authors be left with them, which at present is as much as to say, Give me a stick, and I will break your head.—At the same time they, very impertinently, take upon them to style all *such productions* ‘wicked, rascally, malicious,’ &c.—I had hitherto supposed a *printer* ought to be above prejudices of this nature, and not capable of being so easily actuated by the *popular frenzy* of the hour. . . .”

**ARGUS, PROVIDENCE UNITED STATES
CHRONICLE, 8 NOVEMBER 1787 (EXCERPT)**

MR. WHEELER, The Liberty of the Press, or the Liberty which *every Person* in the United States *at present* enjoys, of exhibiting his Sentiments on all public Measures to his Fellow-Citizens, through the Medium of the News-Papers, is a Privilege of infinite Importance—a Privilege, for which (among others) we have fought and bled, and for which I would again shoulder my Musket. I confess the Attempt lately made in Boston, by some of our aristocratical Gentry, to have every Person’s Name published who should write against the proposed Federal Constitution, has given many of us a just Alarm. Why, if the proposed Constitution is a good one are its Supporters afraid to have any Thing said against it? Why are they hurrying it down our Throats, before we have opened our Mouths? For what Purpose is it that the Names of its Opposers should be published? Why all this extraordinary Exertion? If it is *very good*, *very just*, and *wisely calculated* to make us respectable and happy, no Doubt it will be adopted—But pray, my good Friends, give us a Chance to read it once or twice over before we say whether we like it or not. . . .

*A FARMER, GAZETTE OF THE STATE OF
GEORGIA, 29 NOVEMBER 1787 (EXCERPTS)*

. . . in a government like ours, whose principles are not sufficiently defined, whose institutions are vague and loose, and which . . . has not established a respectability, there is too great a door left open for every adventurer to disturb its tranquility and to frustrate the views of its real patriots. . . . Amongst the different modes of imposture made use of by these adventurers, that of making your paper a vehicle of their seditious nonsense has grown most into use and therefore calls the most loudly for redress. They have nothing to do but to rake together a few inapplicable scraps of history, a few crude observations, a few innuendoes respecting their own sagacity and their love of their country, some suspicions of those in power, and a few blasphemous appeals to Heaven for the rectitude of their intentions; and, combining them all into a political hotchpotch, send it forth into the world through your paper as the immaculate offspring of prescience and patriotism; and, to make a greater impression upon the world, they never fail to sanctify their productions with some sacred, respectable, or specious signature. . . .

I would therefore propose . . . as a remedy to this growing evil, that in future you keep a register or list of all your literary correspondents containing their real, not their assumed names, and make their acquiescence in this measure a condition of publishing their performances.

This register or list must be written in a legible hand, pasted on a board, and hung up in your office, in the manner that the list of persons intending to depart the state is hung up in the naval office, and should be free at all times for inspection. Among the many salutary consequences that would flow from this regulation, I dare say . . . it would save you a great deal of what must be a very irksome labor, publishing the lucubrations of knaves and blockheads. . . . If the author of a late piece under the specious signature of "A *Georgian*" had been subjected to this touchstone . . . the public would never have had his heterogeneous performance foisted upon them. . . . As far as my small abilities enable me to form a judgment of him, he can be no tried friend to *Georgia*, nor no native of its soil; his sentiments proclaim the former, and his foreign idiom the latter. . . .■

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR A SOCRATIC SEMINAR

- In your opinion, does the practice of allowing authors to use pseudonyms favor one side of the ratification debate over the other?
- Which Federalist arguments are reasonable in your opinion? Which are unreasonable?
- What events may have factored into Antifederalists insisting on anonymity for authors?
- Does the public always have a right to know the identity of authors who write opinion pieces?
- What do you think about “A Farmer’s” distrust of suspected community outsiders? Do outsiders have a right to comment on issues internal to another community?
- In a debate, are there any circumstances that warrant one side having anonymity and the other side being forced to reveal its identity?
- In your view, does the media have an obligation to serve the community at large or just its subscribers? (Note: In the early republic, most printers feared losing subscriptions and advertisements if they printed materials that ran counter to the opinions of their customers.)
- Should newspapers today require that letters to the editor be signed by the authors? Does the size of the community being served make a difference?
- Does the anonymity of the Internet facilitate open discussion?



TEACHING TOOLS

I. Evaluating the Federalist and Antifederalist Arguments Regarding Anonymity

1. Divide the class into eight groups of 3–5 students. Half of the class will read a Federalist document. The other half will read an Antifederalist document.
2. Groups should have access to the charts below.

Federalist Authors	Arguments Opposing Anonymity
“A Citizen”	
“A Pennsylvania Mechanic”	
“A Farmer”	

Antifederalist Authors	Arguments Favoring Anonymity
“Solon”	
<i>Freeman’s Journal</i>	
“Argus”	

3. After each group has read its assigned document, have group members develop short statements that summarize their author’s point of view. Have them record the statements in the chart.
4. Have each group share its findings with the class.
5. Ask the students who read Federalist documents if they found any Antifederalist arguments convincing.
6. Ask the students who read Antifederalist documents if they found any Federalist arguments convincing.
7. Conclude the lesson by leading a discussion using these questions:
 - In your opinion, does the practice of allowing authors to use pseudonyms favor one side of the ratification debate over the other?
 - Which Federalist arguments are reasonable in your opinion? Which are unreasonable?

- What events may have factored into Antifederalists insisting on anonymity for authors?
- Does the public always have a right to know the identity of authors who write opinion pieces?

II. An Attacking Farmer: The Use of *Ad Hominem* in “A Farmer”

Note: Before beginning this lesson, you may want to brief students on what constitutes an *ad hominem* attack or argument.

1. Have the students read the document “A Farmer.” As they read, have them identify specific words that can be considered *ad hominem* attacks.
2. After students have read the document, have them report their findings. Create a working list of all the words that students identified.
3. You may want to lead a short discussion using these questions:
 - Are some words used by “A Farmer” more inflammatory than others? If so, which ones?
 - In your opinion, is *ad hominem* attack an appropriate form of argumentation?
 - Why do you think many people use *ad hominem* attacks?

VOCABULARY**A Citizen**

1. *erroneous*: mistaken
2. *impositions*: burdens

Solon

1. *ardently*: passionately or enthusiastically
2. *salutary*: helpful or beneficial
3. *arduous*: difficult
4. *circumspection*: caution
5. *propriety*: politeness or decency
6. *bulwarks*: protective walls or fortifications
7. *censured*: criticized or reprimanded
8. *despotism*: tyranny
9. *restringent*: binding or restrictive

A Pennsylvania Mechanic

junto: a group of people united for a purpose

Philadelphia Freeman's Journal

1. *malicious*: hateful
2. *accentuated*: emphasized or highlighted

Argus

exertion: effort

A Farmer

1. *imposture*: deception
2. *sedition*: rebellious or subversive
3. *redress*: compensation
4. *sagacity*: wisdom
5. *prescience*: foresight
6. *sanctify*: purify
7. *specious*: false
8. *salutary*: helpful
9. *irksome*: annoying
10. *lucubrations*: scholarly writings
11. *knaves*: untrustworthy men
12. *heterogeneous*: varied or mixed
13. *idiom*: phrase or expression