

## The Press and the Constitution

In the fall of 1787 the principles of open access to and impartiality of the press became important issues in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Providence, and Hartford. On 4 October, Thomas Greenleaf of the Antifederalist *New York Journal* felt obliged to defend himself against charges of partiality—the first newspaper publisher to do so during the debate over the Constitution. Greenleaf implied that he had been attacked for printing “Cato” I and defenses of Antifederalist Governor George Clinton. Greenleaf, however, insisted that he was impartial and that he would publish both articles for and against the Constitution.

On 4 October a correspondent of the Boston *Independent Chronicle* claimed that every American had the right to publish his sentiments on the Constitution. But he believed that no writer should conceal his name and he asked the state’s printers “whether it will be best to publish any production, where the author chooses to remain concealed.”

Benjamin Russell of the Federalist *Massachusetts Centinel* was the first printer to heed this advice. On 10 October Russell, who had not published any Antifederalist material in his semiweekly newspaper, refused to print an Antifederalist essay signed “Lucius” until the author left his name to “be handed to the publick, if required.” Russell also admonished his fellow Boston printers not to publish any Antifederalist material. He declared that he would not print such material unless “the writers leave ... their names to be made publick if desired.”

Russell’s policy caused an immediate uproar. On 15 October Edward E. Powars of the Antifederalist Boston *American Herald* denounced Russell’s policy, stating that the Constitution did not require “the aid of any uncommon expedient ...”

Despite this position, Powars published on the same day an essay by “Harrington” in which the author “applaud[ed] the manly resolution of some printers, in refusing to publish any thing on this important subject, but what the authors are ready to avow—”

On 16 October “A Citizen” stated that, in order to protect the public against “foreign and domestick enemies,” “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.” Such a position, he maintained, was “perfectly consistent with the liberty of the press.” In an editorial note to “A Citizen,” the printer of the *Massachusetts Gazette* agreed to “adopt the rule referred to” by “A Citizen.” The printer of the *Gazette*, however, refused to divulge the name of a correspondent who, in a series of paragraphs, had itemized several “very serious difficulties in the way of the new confederation.” The correspondent wanted his name withheld because he sought to avoid “the treatment which has been so liberally bestowed” on other Antifederalists. The printer assured the public that the correspondent was not a state officeholder, and that “his only wish was for discussion and deliberation....” Moreover, the correspondent promised not to submit “any more observations on the subject.”

Responding to Russell and his supporters, “Solon” in the Boston *Independent*

*Chronicle* of 18 October accused them of trying “to damp a spirit of enquiry, and a freedom and independence of sentiments, which are so essential to the existence of free Governments.” “Solon” believed 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.”

Boston Antifederalists also feared the effect of Russell’s policy. “John De Witt” wrote that “The name of the man who but lisp[s] a sentiment in objection to it [i.e., the Constitution], is to be handed to the printer, by the printer to the publick, and by the publick he is to be led to execution.” George R. Minot (1758–1802), a Boston lawyer and clerk of the state House of Representatives, stated that it would have been dangerous for Antifederalist authors to have submitted their names “as ye. mechanicks had been worked up to such a degree of rage, that it was unsafe to be known to oppose it; while “One of the People” warned Antifederalists, in general, “to be cautious how they proceed, for the oppositions they make, or try to make at this time will soon produce their final downfall, and forever exclude them from any appointment of either honour or profit under its establishment.”

On 24 October Benjamin Russell indirectly defended his policy in his preface to the *Centinel’s* reprinting of James Wilson’s speech of 6 October “How much to be preferred are the sentiments and observations of a gentleman, who comes forward with his name, and who is acquainted with the great principles of the subject on which he treats, to the envenomed suggestions, the dark surmises, and cabalistical inuendoes of secret plodders, the baseness of whose designs is equal only to their ignorance.”

Russell, however, softened his attitude toward Antifederalist publicists almost immediately. On the same day that he reprinted Wilson’s speech, Russell was in the Massachusetts House of Representatives taking notes of the debates on calling a state convention, when a member of that body denounced the “check ... put to a free discussion of the new federal constitution, by the Printers refusing to insert several pieces on the subject, presented to them....” Russell replied that the legislator’s “suggestion,” as far as it respected him, “had not any foundation in truth.” To prove his point, “he readily” reprinted on 27 October “An Old Whig” I the first Antifederalist essay to appear in the *Massachusetts Centinel*.

To counteract “An Old Whig” I, Russell printed three Federalist replies to it in his next issue of 31 October. Other Antifederalist pieces published by Russell were treated similarly.

In New York, Antifederalists were dismayed by Russell’s policy and the support it had received. On 25 October “Detector” indicated that the liberty of the press was essential to freedom and that “the greatest security of an absolute government is, ‘the ignorance of the people’.” Richard Henry Lee declared that “The friends of just Liberty here [New York City] are astonished at the Occlusion of the Press in Boston at a season so momentous to Mankind. It is thought to augur ill of the New Government proposed, that on its being first ushered into the world, it should destroy the great Palladium of human rights.”

Russell’s policy caused the greatest furor in Philadelphia. On 24 October the Antifederalist *Freeman’s Journal* printed a letter allegedly from a Bostonian, who

expressed alarm at “the endeavour of *certain characters* amongst us to insult the understanding of the public, by preventing that freedom of enquiry which truth and honour never dreads, but which tyrants and tyranny could never endure.” Between 25 and 27 October, three Philadelphia newspapers reprinted “A Citizen.” A few days later, “A Pennsylvania Mechanic,” and “Galba” supported Russell’s position; “The Jewel,” a Federalist, also advocated this policy, but insisted that it also be applied to Federalists. In turn, the *Freeman’s Journal* published another alleged letter from Boston condemning Russell’s policy. The Philadelphia debate climaxed when “Philadelphiensis” I attacked Russell and his supporters in the *Independent Gazetteer* and the *Freeman’s Journal* on 7 November.

Another criticism of the Boston printers appeared in the Providence *United States Chronicle* on 8 November. In this attack, “Argus” asserted that the attempts by Boston’s “aristocratical Gentry” to limit the free access to the press in that city had “given many of us a just Alarm.” If the Constitution was such a good form of government, “Argus” could not understand why its supporters were “afraid to have any Thing said against it.” A week later a correspondent answered “Argus” and asked why, if the Constitution was such a bad form of government, “are its opposers ashamed of their names.”

While the debate over Russell’s publication policy spread, charges of partiality were levelled against the printers of the two Hartford newspapers—the *Connecticut Courant* and the *American Mercury*. These avowedly Federalist printers claimed that Antifederalists had accused them of being under the control “of certain men” who prohibited the publication of Antifederalist pieces. The printers denied that they had been under the influence of others and stated that they had not been offered any articles opposing the Constitution. They also expressed a willingness to assist those who were “diffident of their own skill in composition.”

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