Balogné Bérces, Katalin – Kaščáková, Janka – Kačer, Tomáš (eds.),
Crossing borders between countries, scholars, and genres:
Commemorating the late Kathleen E. Dubs. Ružomberok: Verbum.
ISBN 978–80–561–1171–0 (print), ISBN 978–80–561–1172–7 (online)

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From Gentle Wit to Venomous Bites: Benjamin Franklin's "Industry" of Marketing Ideas

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Perhaps unconventionally for an academic essay, but fitting the overall spirit of this publication, I must begin by stating that this writing was not only inspired by Kathleen Dubs's endeavors or academic interests in general, but was born in "conversation" with a specific paper she published in *Faces of English*. Her essay (Dubs 2011) primarily calls attention to some lesser-discussed satires of the Franklin oeuvre at a time when these were being collected and edited by Yale University and were not yet widely accessible online.[1] Her aim seems to have been not only to show how dark and sinister Franklin's satire became later in his life, but also to debunk a myth about Franklin – that his writing was a means to an end, and never merely an artistic endeavor, or a self-serving outburst of frustration. She explored the "dark face of Franklin that legend-admiring audiences would rather not see," and argued that especially the post-Revolution satires of the 1780s lacked a specific audience and their darkness "blackened out" any effectiveness (2011, 193). She implies that these "biting" texts impress the reader as outlets for Franklin's gout, or imprints of a tormented soul, rather than carrying lessons for public benefit.

I would, however, suggest that Benjamin Franklin did not lose sight of utility. Instead, as much as in his earlier years, he adjusted the style to the subject matter, and his target audience, and exercised what modern political or marketing communication would call *strategic placement*. This means that specific images or narratives are published in media consumed by the target audience or known to be influential in specific circles of society. Humor is certainly one way to combine reason with emotive effects that can best sell the brand – the more absurd, the higher the shock value. What strikes the reader as sinister, or so dark that it unreflectively obscures utility, was a very seri-

[1] Franklin's published papers are now arranged by Yale University and the American Philosophical Society into 37 edited volumes publicly available (for study purposes only) online at https://franklinpapers.org/ with 9 further chronologically organized folders of unpublished papers, along with his *Autobiography* similarly accessible for this digital collection. However, unless indicated otherwise, I will cite and reference the U.S. National Archives *Founders Online* collection exhibiting both Franklin's original and annotations adopted from the print volumes of *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (Franklin 1751; 1773a; 1773b; 1774; 1782).

ous endeavor, or a serious Franklinian hoax presenting fabricated news through deftly devised authenticity proxies.

Franklin had a sound understanding of both his audience and the power of media, and used his accumulated insights to further the causes he took up. His transitioning from *Silence Dogood* to *Americanus* not only coincided with the transformation of the colonists from British subjects to citizens of a new Republic, but also illustrates how his satirical writings shaped the agenda and moved the political conversation from the congregation to the national assembly and onto the international stage. In this paper, I wish to demonstrate how Franklin's notion of *industry* always embodied multiple meanings: not only combating idleness and applying ingenuity to public service, but also – more in line with the modern sense – the industry of promoting ideas, from self-improvement to the advancement of national policy. While his best-known satires suggest an evolution of style from "gentle wit" to "the outrageous" (Dubs 2011), he applied these various styles simultaneously, fitting the occasion and his target audience rather than moving from good-natured humor to malicious venom.

To make my case, I will first expand on Franklin's very own newspaper business to showcase his media-savviness through his tenure as printer and owner of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, his main propaganda enterprise, which he also used to market his *Almanack*. In fact, Franklin was a media mogul and propagandist long before he became famous for his political pamphlets and signature hoaxes. It is through his experience as newspaper owner, printer, practical journalist, and agenda-setter that he developed an acute sense of his audience and the multiple ways he could manipulate public opinion.

Franklin the Pennsylvania Media Mogul and Agenda-Setter

We are fascinated with his humorous or sensationalist fillers, as well as his literary flair in adapting Swiftian and other satire strategies to American contexts. However, little attention is generally paid to the multiple ways Franklin commanded colonial communication platforms, allowing him to wield significant influence over public discourse. He owned not just *a* news business but *the* news business.

While Franklin's writings influenced colonial sentiments before he assumed ownership of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1728, it was certainly his tenure as printer-publisher that sharpened his understanding of the emerging power of the media. He recorded colonial sentiments as much as he shaped public discourse, first out of necessity, on account of his trade, and later through the monopoly this trade accorded to him over news and agenda. The *Gazette* was, of course, a business venture. He undoubtedly wanted to fill it with content that would yield the highest possible circulation and thus revenue. The examination of the newspaper industry in its infancy would suggest that

Franklin's writing the paper "from beginning to end" was less an outlet for his creative genius than a necessity, and that his mastering of all print media was inherent in his trade. Yet, the comparison with other printers of his age also demonstrates how consciously he cultivated these skills to put his industry to public service.

Looking back at the early decades of the *Gazette*, we must recognize that printing was a "preindustrial, hand-pressed, horse-carried" trade, the printer was an artisan engaged in dirty physical work, and the newspaper itself was a one-man show (Parkinson 2015). Typically, there was only one regular paper in town, and only in the larger cities of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia (Adelman 2019). The printer was not an investigative journalist but rather a seeker of news, relying on public officials walking into the printshop "bearing information of public import" or volunteering a private letter "anonymously extracted for public consumption," as well as his correspondence with other colonial printers and European newspapers, or private acquaintances (Parkinson 2015, Adelman 2019). The four-page weeklies printed "occurrences" and "exchanges," local news and announcements, and reports picked up from other papers (Breig 2003, Parkinson 2015). Later these exchanges became the vehicle for sharing ideas across the colonies through what Adelman (2019) calls *Revolutionary Networks*.[2] While colonial printers held significant influence over public discourse by curating, editing, and publishing materials (Adelman 2019), Franklin demonstrated exceptional ingenuity in his technical skills – that also advertised his trade – and leveraged this system for audience engagement.

Preparing the pages for the press was time-consuming and required careful planning. To maximize efficiency, printers first assembled the front and back covers filled with ads and announcements that could run for several weeks. They compiled colonial and European news lifted from other papers for page two, leaving the local coverage to be finalized just before press run (Adelman 2019, 2–3). This was the standard and a near-uniform practice across the colonies as well as on the other side of the Atlantic (Clark and Wetherell 1989, 283, 295), where we will revisit Franklin to see how the then diplomat-printer manipulates the British news industry with his strategic hoaxes.

One often overlooked aspect of newspaper reading at the time was its communal and oral nature. Rather than being a solitary affair, printed news and pamphlets were read out loud in taverns and other public spaces; papers were loaned, passed on, and saved for special occasions (Parkinson 2015; Thompson 2011, 453). This means that the readership, or rather audience, was vastly larger than the number of subscribers, and

[2] Exploring all aspects of the news industry in its infancy, Adelman (2019) investigates how colonial printers facilitated discourse and influenced ideology before and during the Revolution.

that layout, typeset, and "authorship" played a crucial role in shaping how information was consumed. Franklin consciously cultivated these aspects of orality by capitalizing words for emphasis, strategically placing items within standard newspaper sections to authenticate the sources, and manipulating layout for the purpose of guiding readers.

Newspaper columns looked much like today but there were no catchy headlines, and pseudonyms were the norm to protect both author and the printer. One must remember that freedom of the press is an eighteenth-century development. America's first newspaper (Boston's *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick*) did not survive to see a second issue in 1690 for reporting on British troops allying themselves with "miserable" savages, and that Franklin's brother[3] not only lost his newspaper license but was also imprisoned on charges of libel (Breig 2003). Printing and running a newspaper were not without hazards. Franklin's ingenuity with pen names and sustained fictitious personae not only efficiently navigated this system but also leveraged it through satirizing the real and plausible colonial characters and to establish "authentic" sources for the issues he wrote about.

Whereas the tedious labor of laying out the weekly issue required craft and artisanship, it was the editing of the paper that gave printers immense power to shape public discourse or the political agenda. The printshop controlled information, and the printer was the curator of news. Printers had to cultivate extensive networks to obtain the news – not just from local sources but also from other colonies, European correspondents, government officials, private inquiries, and even ship captains or debarking passengers (Aldridge 1962, 77). Colonial printers wanted to outpace rivals by obtaining news faster[4] and having access to sources that other printers did not. They sifted through these items and decided what to print and in what format – never a politically neutral exercise – to best inform their readers and to best sell the paper.

Not only did they control the flow of news and ideas through the newspaper but produced other print materials from commercial and legal forms to custom-ordered broadsides, or pamphlets, and operated their own distribution networks. Adelman's research also confirms that nearly every printer published an almanac – a "sure steady seller" that supplemented revenues and stood as the most popular print medium at

[3] James Franklin published the *New-England Courant* where Benjamin was apprenticed, and where he published his fourteen Silence Dogood essays anonymously, allegedly sneaking them in under the door of the shop. The paper antagonized the clergy and political establishment. James's license was suspended in 1722 and he was banned from publishing the paper, which was henceforward published under Benjamin Franklin's name until 1727 even after he moved to Philadelphia.

[4] The *Gazette* could boast a good selection of Pennsylvania news "since our last," meaning the previous edition and thus less than a week old, but the majority of news and reports were more than three-month old when they hit the page in Philadelphia (Clark and Wetherell 1989, 295).

the time (2019, 4). This granted printers virtual monopoly over print communication at a time when print was the primary medium. Franklin's *Poor Richard's Almanack* – affectionately dubbed "Poor Dicks" by his wife – sold more than ten thousand copies a year hand in hand with the *Gazette*, which he developed into a leading colonial newspaper and a commercial success[5] (Clark and Wetherell 1989, Lepore 2008). One sold the other.

It is important to note, however, that throughout the 1730s and 40s, Franklin shaped public discourse primarily through his *Gazette*. Adelman's survey of colonial printers found that newspapers still accounted for 80% of all print media "even going mid-century" (2019, 6), granting printers firm control over content, from sourcing to editing. Like other colonial publishers, Franklin relied on the British papers for the news from Europe, and edited it for local consumption when it was plentiful. He was the primary interface between the colonists and the wider world. It was during the dead of winter, with the port of Philadelphia iced over, when – abandoning the widespread practice of republishing encyclopedia entries – he filled the *Gazette* with his own writings (Aldridge 1962, 77). The "Darth of News" proved lucrative in the long run. Franklin's ability to integrate humor and moral reflections in ways that resonated deeply with his readers earned him money and influence over the agenda.

Other than running sensationalist pieces in the 1730s to "oblige the Subscriber," he acted as his own columnist, writing about local affairs and science, providing legal and medical advice, and ridiculing dubious practices through vitriolic verse in the *Almanack* and through hoaxes in the *Gazette* (Aldridge 1962, Detweiler 1973). He dipped his pen in biting acid early on, "spewing jibes" at itinerary lawyers who compensated for their lack of training or competence[6] with absurdly ornate but meaningless legalese. One such example – reprinted almost in full by historian Robert Detweiler to illustrate his point – is a purported legal petition from 1736.[7] Its sheer length was enough to

[5] By systematically analyzing the *Gazette's* financial records and contents between 1728 and 1765, Clark and Wetherell (1989) found that not only did the paper make comfortable profits, but also that more than 20% of the revenue came directly from paid advertising. The diagrams on page 290 of their study indicate that the number and space taken up by these ads grew steadily from the early 1740s and peaked in the early 50s, showing that popularity firmly established by Franklin's editing and writings turned the paper into the ultimate platform for advertising in Philadelphia.

[6] Detweiler notes that this attitude was undoubtedly shaped by the prevalence of poorly trained lawyers, often referred to as "Dirty Pettifoggers." At the time, most households owned legal manuals that gave them the language and information needed to present themselves at court. Franklin also often acted as his own lawyer.

[7] Indeed, the full appreciation of Franklinian absurdities often requires engaging with them in their entirety. While shorter excerpts may highlight clever puns or literary devices, they fail to capture the overarching brilliance grounded in structure, or sustained voice. Dubs (2011) also quotes the Franklin texts profusely, including longer passages. Since, however, the present paper focuses on printing strategies rather than style or composition, citing the original texts is limited to hallmark soundbites, or very characteristic wording.

physically cover the tract of land it sought to secure (Detweiler 1973, 1165), albeit with neither its subject nor its argument transpiring from the string of words. The counterfeit document "sourced by the Printer" is a Franklinian absurd so characteristic of his late satires, not only presenting the case from the very fictitious person he is ridiculing but so doing in the diction and rhetorical formulae particular to the practice he is exposing. Wordsmithing exaggerated legalese without substance is different only in language – not in strategy – from the logical historical reasoning or the inventory style tallies of the late pamphlets.

What Detweiler does not discuss is how Franklin used typeset, notably, the strategically inserted capitalized common nouns[8] to amplify irony and ridicule. Capitalizing, and thus stressing otherwise mundane words like "Part" or "Money" within a sea of lower-case formulaic nonsense – such as, "therefore to will, and to shall be, now and then, and there, and at this time, and at the time past, and heretofore, and formerly, and at the present, and forever" – create a dizzying, almost nauseating rhythm when read aloud. With a view to orality, Franklin composed these pieces to enhance the performative aspects of satire. We will see other subliminal codes in his later hoaxes when print types and fonts become more varied, but the earlier works generally directed both gaze and intonation through marked words.

Similar writings under all sorts of pen names appeared on the pages of the *Gazette*, together with factual "occurrences" and "exchanges" lifted from other papers, or "communicating instructions," as Franklin writes in his *Autobiography*, by reprinting "extracts from the 'Spectator,' and other moral writers" (Lemay and Zall 1986, 114). Eventually the printer Franklin became one of these moral writers himself. In parallel with the down-to-earth folk wisdom of *Poor Richard*, Franklin used these fillers to "cajole" his readers into do-gooding, or to deliver critical attacks assuming fictional personae but reflecting the very real characters of colonial America (Thompson 2011). Ultimately, as Franklin himself confessed, everything he wrote was political (Lepore 2008).[9] He did not necessarily invent new journalistic features or columns, but masterfully leveraged the existing types, most often the "Letter to the Editor," to further political causes in much the same way as is done today.

[8] This is also seen in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), but capitalizing most common nouns was an extensive practice in eighteenth-century America. The *Declaration of Independence* would also follow this custom. Wendorf (2022) suggests that while Jefferson penned it in a style that became fashionable around the 1760s, the document was eventually printed following the older rules for typeset, as per Franklin's specific instructions. It is also evident though from many of his satirical pieces that he used this selectively for the words he intended to be stressed in speech.

[9] In a *New Yorker* article for the 250th anniversary of *Way to Wealth*, Harvard historian Jill Lepore cites a letter from Franklin's sister asking him for a copy of "all the Political pieces" he had ever written, to which Franklin answered that "I could as easily make a Collection for you of all the past Parings of my Nails" (Lepore 2008).

As the Gazette became self-sufficient by the mid 1730s – thanks in no small part to Poor Richard, who evolved into an archetypical American[10] (Lepore 2008; Ross 1940, 786–88) – Franklin could turn his attention to other formats and to broader colonial matters. In 1741, he launched a literary magazine, *The General Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, as an auxiliary to the *Gazette*, publishing his *Essay on Paper-Currency* the same year (parts of which resurfaced in his 1766 pamphlet against the Stamp Act). He likely contributed other material that he repurposed later for new contexts (Aldridge 1962, 81).[11] Going into the 1750s, his writings increasingly addressed British imperial conduct or insufficient coordination among the colonies.

By the time pamphleteering emerged as the dominant platform for generating public debates, Franklin had become *Americanus*, a distinct species of colonial subject. An early specimen representing colonies-wide discontent, and Franklin's violently accusatory language, is his famous "Felons and Rattlesnakes" satire – the first of the Dubs-sampled writings. Written as a letter to the *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1751 and signed *Americanus*, Franklin proposes *modest* means by which the parental care of the English government, "emptying their *Jails* into our Settlements" can be returned, or should be answered in kind. In this, Franklin argues that Britain sending shiploads of convicts to the colonies, to help them grow – though the colonial papers reported a series of heinous crimes as their contributions – should be recompensed with shiploads of rattlesnakes, which Franklin defines as "felons-convict from the beginning of the world," and most "suitable returns for the human serpents sent us by the mother country" (Franklin 1751).

Less biting, but curiously repeating the serpent imagery, is a Franklin-designed editorial cartoon, a novel format that Franklin introduced to colonial newspapering. Starting in the 1740s, he began adorning his pamphlets with engravings and woodcut illustrations, recognizing the interplay "between imageries and text in a way that others did not" (Canva 2015). This had less to do with being a gifted graphic artist – for although he did some of the creative work himself, he employed engravers and woodcutters. It was, however, his intuitive sense of how readers decoded the drawing that elevated Franklin to "America's first genius of the viral political image" (Canva 2015). The

[10] Franklin originally based his Richard Sounders character, the fictious persona and author of *Poor Richard's Almanac*, on Swift's Isaac Bickerstaff, a pseudonym for a 1728 hoax that predicted the death of the then-famous almanac-maker John Partridge. Franklin's attack targeted Titan Leeds, the Philadelphia-based publisher of *The American Almanack*. John D. Ross showcases multiple parallels between the two, but argues that Poor Richard eventually evolved into an American archetype. Also remarking on the origins of the fictious character, Jill Lepore discusses how *Poor Richard* eventually "cost" Franklin to be credited with the American Creed despite Franklin's intentions to offer practical guideline for the times.

[11] Since most of these essays did not bear Franklin's name, it was often only the recurrence of these themes and their styles, or exact passages in Franklin's later works that helped Aldridge establish authorship.

best example of this is his iconic "Join, or Die," which first appeared in the May 9, 1754 issue of the *Gazette* (Franklin 1754). Occasioned by the impending war with France, it depicts a dismembered snake representing America severed into distinct provinces that were not likely to withstand any attack from the north without uniting their governments. Franklin himself devised the image to promote what would become known as the Albany Plan. In his *Autobiography*, he recounts: "I projected and drew a plan for the union of all the colonies under one government, so far as might be necessary for defense and other important general purposes" (Lemay and Zall 1986, 109). Evaluating the plan with the benefit of hindsight, Franklin muses that this would have made the stationing of "English troops, and the Pretense of subsequent Taxing" unnecessary, avoiding "[t]he Bloody Contest it occasioned" (ibid., 110). With little immediate efficacy, the image ultimately became one of the most powerful banners of the Revolution twenty years later, with the motto "Don't Tread On Me." This non-elaborate woodcut masterfully captures both the causes and the aspirations of the Revolutionary War.

With already keen understanding of his colonial audience, Franklin gained further insights from the pamphlet wars of 1764. The pamphlet was originally not a genre but a print form, custom-ordered leaflet, or booklet, flexible in size and cheap to produce. Essays could be serialized in the weekly paper or could be printed as pamphlets (Parkinson 2015). However, as a "medium of rapid response that allowed for greater elaboration than the newspaper" (Richter 2020), pamphlets became the primary means of disseminating critical views in the 1750s, with the printer controlling both the medium and its distribution. The pamphlet wars were viral outbursts, with people trading "barbs and fiery accusations" on cheap paper – hastily typeset and distributed by the city's printing house (Richter 2020).

One of these, with Franklin as pen-party, broke out in Pennsylvania over frontier defense and Indian raids. This *print* conflict, involving Franklin and the Paxton Boys (a mob of frontier settlers attacking indigenous encampments), is documented in the "Digital Paxton" collection, encompassing 69 pamphlets, broadsides, political cartoons, and newspapers. The Paxtons' savage attack on defenseless Native women and children, "all scalped and otherwise horribly mangled," is reenacted in Franklin's 1764 pamphlet *A Narrative of the Late Massacres*. In the sequel, he evoked sympathy in his Christian audience by tallying victims according to their English names and their virtues (Richter 2020). The Paxton Boys countered with pamphlets blaming the colony's assembly for inadequate defense. There were other massacres, some bloodier, but none generated more debate than the ones *in print*. The "business of protest," remarks the curator of the collection, also proved lucrative for the printer – one print material sold the other. The "ink-drenched battle" that followed the Paxton incidents accounted

for nearly one-fifth of all the publications printed in Pennsylvania in 1764 (Richter 2020), with the printer presiding over the agenda.

Franklin also witnessed another pamphlet war over British colonial policies, originating in Boston and raging in London during his visit. The pamphlets he could read in the British press at the time inverted popular arguments, mimicked the style of authorities, made the case for self-government by appealing to early British colonial practice in Ireland, and included "credible" letters to the King (Green 2024).[12] Historical accounts tell us that Franklin was witness to it while testifying in Parliament about the prospective effects of the Stamp Act (Lepore 2008). While these pamphlets likely laid the groundwork for strategies he later refined for his hoaxes, he could also enhance his understanding of British audiences, and how best to manipulate them. At the time though, it was not his pamphlet that stood out, but rather a memorable quip. During debates on the repeal of the Stamp Act, Franklin was asked how soldiers sent to enforce the new taxes would be received, to which he answered, "They will not find rebellion; they may indeed make one" (Lepore 2008).

Strategic Placements and Authenticity Proxies Targeting Policy Makers

We have seen how Franklin leveraged his media enterprise for both profit and for marketing ideas. The Stamp Act ultimately transformed not only attitudes towards British imperial governance but also the colonial newspapers that went from "provincial mirrors" to "active combatants" (Clark and Wetherell 1989, 301). By the 1770s, Franklin had expanded the discourse beyond the *Revolutionary Network*, bringing it onto the transatlantic stage. Instead of simply airing his growing bitterness in obscure publications (Dubs 2011, 188–91), Franklin exploited the "Letters to the Editor" to shape public opinion. The conventions of the genre made it possible to hide behind a pseudonym, which Franklin devised to best *authenticate* the content by attributing the work to an author whose trade or position validated the report. He further enhanced credibility through the author's geographical proximity to the original source of information, while his neutral bystander role positioned him as an effective authenticity proxy for the cause.

The writings from this period that Kathleen Dubs scrutinizes are indeed darker in tone but nonetheless very much signature Franklin, mostly combining the Americanized varieties of the Swiftian hoax and the strategies from the Pamphlet Wars. What makes these late satires intriguing is not the novelties of style, but the conspicuous circumstances of publication. The legal-political logic and timely puns make them historians' favorites, and the best of Franklin (Lepore 2008). They also demonstrate his

[12] The Digital Collection (Green 2024) from the Liberty Fund offers a quick survey of titles and synopses.

mastery of strategic placement and authenticity proxies for manipulating British audiences in the lead-up to the Revolution in the early 1770s, and to sway public opinion during his diplomatic tenure in the early 1780s. Interestingly, Dubs finds these masterpieces "some of his most uncharacteristic" for their "biting" language, lacking specific audience or apparent benefit.

One example in Dubs's sampling, jumping from 1754 to 1773, is "Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be reduced to a Small One" published in the *Public Advertiser* in London (Franklin 1773a). The piece is an "absurd inversion," writes Dubs, in which Franklin "enumerates" existing legal practices to achieve the proposed end (Dubs 2011, 188). The author assumes the position of the imperial government and earnestly suggests that, because "the cake is mostly diminished at the edges," the provinces are not to be incorporated but merely kept as outposts, and it is better not to "quarter troops among them at their own expense" lest they revolt. The last of the coolly logical list of twenty rules would accord the leader of the British troops in the "Provinces with great and unconstitutional Powers, and free him from the Controul of even your own Civil Governor" (Franklin 1773a). Franklin very clearly presents his London high society readers with an inventory of all the ill-advised policies directly leading to the Revolution. The publication date, September 11, may trick us into thinking that this was just a light jab before the second attack, the more famous "An Edict of the King of Prussia," published eleven days later in the same paper. In reality, they were two components of the same design. What makes them a pair – and reveals an even cannier Franklin than might be evident from reading them separately – is the adoption of inverse perspectives: one forces the British readers to see their policy through "colonial eyes," while the other "jolted them with the fiction that they were colonists themselves" (Franklin 1773a). As the digital annotations for the National Archives exhibit point out, "the two essays had a single purpose, to induce the public to take a fresh look at the American problem" (Franklin 1773a).

Franklin had made these arguments in more sober formats many times before, but with the "Rules," he adopted the fictitious signature Q.E.D. (*quod erat demonstrandum*), as if presenting the most self-evident proof of a mathematical theorem. For the "Edict," he assumed the voice of a Prussian privy council secretary, the piece appearing in the paper as though the editor had sourced it directly from Danzig – lending it an air of legitimacy. Both were shrewd authenticity proxies designed to reinforce the arguments he was making and to resonate with the salon audiences of *The Public Advertiser*. Franklin did not have the benefit of focus groups and detailed statistics on cohorts; instead, he relied on the acute sense of audiences he had developed as a printer. One should also note how Franklin's designs leveraged the standard practices of newspaper

editing at the time. The items made good gossip and sure "exchange" material, or good copy. In fact, *The Public Advertiser* was a publication that reached the highest circles of society, serving as a platform for challenging British government policies. This political and literary journal – similarly to its colonial counterparts – was the vehicle of not only news *in print* but also for generating public debate at society events.

As a political piece of reasoned argument, "An Edict by the King of Prussia" makes pretensions at validity by citing historical facts to expose the absurdity of the British claim over the colonies on the grounds of English discovery and settlement. The past Germanic invasion of the British Isles would allow Germany to impose similar mandates over Britain. Evoking the German concept of nationhood, the Edict demands that the British Isles be returned to Prussia, an alarming prospect for the genteel audiences the satire targeted. As an eighteenth-century form of social media post, the hoax went viral circulating salons and being "lifted" and reprinted by multiple newspapers. We also learn from Franklin's letter to his son that only a few of his English friends suspected the writing to be "some of your American jokes upon us" (Franklin 1773b).

Franklin was fully aware of his audience and the language it demanded. He notes in this letter to his son that he had written these two pieces "designed to expose the conduct of this country […] in out-of-the-way forms, as most likely to take the general attention" (Franklin 1773b). Franklin's deliberate use of typesetting for desired effects is revealed in the same letter where he also complained about the removal of his "capitalling and italicking" in the *Chronicle*[13] reprint of "Edict". His frustration underscores not only his belief that print style was integral to the message but also, as Thompson points out, his awareness of the "confluence of print and oral communication" (2011, 454). Franklin was of the opinion that lower-case print strips the text of elements that "intimate the allusions and emphasis […] to bring them as near as possible to those spoken." He clearly designed the text for oratory and public performance, and likens the reprint "all in one even small character," to a Whitfield sermon "in the monotony of a school-boy" (Franklin 1773b). As in his *Gazette* pieces, he used typography to mark the words that should be stressed when orally delivered, a visual design functioning multimodally to enhance the desired effects.

The following year, Franklin wrote a letter to the same paper proposing a "method of Humbling American Vassals" signed *A Freeholder of Old Sarum*. Not only is this a reference to the most notorious rotten borough of England,[14] a pun also noticed

[13] The *London Chronicle* reprinted the purported "Edict" on September 23, 1773, a day after it was published in the *Public Advertiser*.

[14] With a seat in the Commons representing a barn and hundreds of sheep, this was the old constituency of William Pitt. As Prime Minster, Pitt oversaw policies that ultimately led to the Stamp Act's imposition on the colonies.

by Dubs (2011, 189), it is (not) coincidentally the constituency of William Pitt the Younger, a major opponent of Lord North's oppressive policies. In this letter, Franklin mockingly suggests that to prevent any possibility of the American colonies growing in strength, the population should be controlled, and "on the blowing of the horn all the males be assembled in the market Place to be castrated" (Franklin 1774). Exporting them as eunuchs, Franklin adds, would even yield extra revenue. This is yet another *modest* American *proposal* to help the British solve their imperial problem. For Dubs, it is a "literally cutting one" (2011, 189), but hardly darker than what the historical circumstances might conceivably occasion. Notably, Franklin's letter appeared on May 21, 1774, the day after the crown passed "An act for the better regulating the government of the province of the Massachusetts Bay, in New England," now regarded as one of the staple primary sources for students of the Revolution.[15] Franklin's *cutting proposal* is either rapid-fire journalism or a prophetic warning. We are a few weeks into the Intolerable Acts, with the port of Boston placed under martial law, and "If all this does not yield to the Humbling of the American Vassals" – and it did not, as by this time the calls for a continental congress were already being sounded – castrating them would be the logical next step.

However, not all of Franklin's satire from the same year cuts body parts; he employs multiple styles simultaneously. He published his well-known piece of Revolution Lore just six weeks earlier, presenting himself as a friend of the military government at a time when it was just being introduced in Boston. What is interesting about the "Open Letter to Lord North" for our purposes is its pretense of aligning with the liberal traditions of coffee house circles – dated *Smyrna Coffee-House*,[16] *April 5* – while ironically proposing that Lord North should not stop at coercive acts but take the next step and exert total control over the unruly colonies (Franklin 1774). As with the "Edict", Franklin used the very media outlet of British high society to advertise his criticism, knowing that his hoax would be read, shared, and gossiped about. It was not an open letter from the colonists but one coming from an authenticity proxy, a seemingly curious but neutral onlooker who argued from a "disinterested" perspective.

These strategies are evident in the last two satires analyzed in the Dubs survey: the *Gerrish Letter* and the *Jones Letter*. These two hoaxes – what might now be termed "fake news" masquerading as legitimate reports – were printed on the front and back

His son later opposed Lord North's draconian measures. The constituency was dissolved only with the Reform Act of 1832.

15 Known as *The Massachusetts Government Act*, it was one of the final straws leading to full-scale rebellion.

16 Existing London coffee house in Pall Mall Street. It was a popular meeting place of writers and intellectuals in the early eighteenth century.

of the same broadsheet – faking a *Supplement to the Boston Chronicle* – designed and printed in Franklin's very own private printshop, which he operated from Passy as an adjunct[17] to his diplomatic endeavors (Mulford 2008, 491–3). Surprisingly, Dubs finds these writings the most "uncharacteristic" of Franklin, not only due to their "biting" nature (2011, 191), but also because their immediate benefit seems unclear. Treating them as distinct works, she remarks, "As it appeared in a New England paper, it is hard to see how the British audience would have been affected in any positive way" – a conclusion that I find perplexing.

True, at face value, these letters, dated 1781 and 1782, appear to originate from New England. The first, the Gerrish Letter, describes brutal Indian raids, while the second, the Jones Letter, attacks the king by mocking British naval failures. Kathleen Dubs notes that these writings "are almost savage," and indeed they are. The first is an inventory of yields from the Indian campaign, titled "Extract of a Letter from Captain Gerrish, of the New England Militia, Albany" and reports on the parcels seized on the St. Lawrence River expedition. Captain Gerrish meticulously tallies the findings, neatly labelled, "No5 Containing 88 Scalps of women; hair long, braided [..] to shew they were mothers […] Of the scalps in No. 8, a mixture of varieties 20 were little Infant scalps […] Ript out of their Mothers' Bellies." The letter further instructs that "[s]amples be sent to museums, the Rest to be distributed among the Houses of Parliament; a double Quantity to the Bishops" (Franklin 1782).

Even if they had appeared in a real supplement of the *Boston Chronicle*, these pieces would have made good copy, eventually circulating among the political elite. Had they surfaced in New England as a report by a local military officer, they would have lent the kind of credibility to the account that Franklin so masterfully cultivated through carefully selected aliases. The fact that these were published in a Franklin-produced fake paper – a hoax from cover to cover – mimicking all the conventions of authentic reporting, proves how the printer-turned-diplomat effectively operated a full-fledged propaganda machine.

Contrary to the appearance that "in a shotgun blast it strikes at Indians, the British, and the Canadians (Dubs 2011, 191), the target was clearly British public opinion. As the American Minister to France, Franklin's official duty was now to generate goodwill for the independent colonies, and to conclude the eventual peace treaty on favorable terms, including reparations (Adams 1956, 135; Mulford 2008, 497, 501). He launched

[17] He also used the printshop to design and issue passports, government forms, and loan certificates, and to design forgery-proof official documents (Mulford 2008, 493–95). The growing scholarship on Passy attests that Franklin's printshop was an elaborate operation, and not just an experiment with a "boyhood craft".

the *Supplement* – as if it had been a special issue of the real *Boston Chronicle*[18] – into the news market on April 22, the day before the final Peace terms were submitted. The Gerrish accounts, or "scalping letter," were meant to dominate the public agenda as a reminder of the British war campaigns of the past, enlisting and mimicking the Indian tactics (Mulford 2008, 501–7). To appear authentic, the Franklin-designed *Supplement* was a "tour de force" of fonts that would accommodate italics and headlines (ibid., 497).[19] The trial run, or first edition, featured neatly designed commercial ads – also hoaxes – on one side, with the Gerrish Letter on the other (ibid., 494). However, there is no evidence that this version was distributed (ibid., 492). The two-sided *Supplement* made waves on both sides of the Atlantic: it was circulated, copied, reprinted, and debated in both Europe and America. Franklin intended for this to happen. He even sent copies to John Adams, who was then negotiating in Amsterdam, and John Jay in Madrid (ibid., 502).

Although his health did decline and contemporaries became increasingly critical of his abilities to serve effectively, these biting pamphlets were not mere outlets for Franklin's gout. By strategically placing his satirical pieces in the right publications, timing their release, using multiple platforms, adopting various personas, and incorporating visual elements, Franklin effectively used satire to enlist public opinion behind a cause and thus indirectly influence decision makers. Franklin was fully aware of the media's power and his ability to harness it. Writing from his Passy residence, he observed, "[b]y the press we can speak to nations" (Parkinson 2015). And now, as America's representative, he sought to do exactly that.

Conclusions

Franklin's writings not only bring early American society up close and personal, providing insights into provincial concerns and local events, they also capture the revolutionary transformation from the 1720s to the drafting of the Constitution in 1787 and beyond. For a social historian, another dimension of Franklin's multifaceted industries is equally fascinating – his role as not only recorder of social and political trends but also as agenda-setter. From his early essays advocating both Christian values and criticizing church practices through gentle humor to the vitriolic attacks on colonial politics, Franklin's writings embody the transformation from provincial subject to public

[18] Franklin's broadside perfectly imitated the size and style of Boston's actual *Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*, numbering it No. 705 as if it were an addendum to the paper's March 12 issue, which reached Europe in late April (Mulford 2008, 496).

[19] Whereas previous annotations highlighted only the Cicero font for its italic capability, Mulford's inventory (2008, 497) identifies six fonts – a broader selection than most printers could afford, including French-made custom designs for Franklin.

servant. He was efficiently using humor to advance his causes, but never in a self-serving way or as a manifestation of mere creative idleness. The record suggests that Franklin applied industry all through his writing career, consistently striving for utility and public good – a "more perfect edition"[20] of self, community, and nation.

This essay argued that Franklin's main industry was marketing ideas, which he pursued with ingenuity and purpose. He adjusted the style for the occasion. Thus, the gentle wit and spewing jibes do not necessarily mark the evolution of his satirical style – the full spectrum ran simultaneously. He was not only crafty with words, but also a conscious user of the print media in disseminating his views, believing that his efforts would serve the public good. For want of a better word, to borrow from our twenty-first-century vocabulary, Franklin was running a propaganda machine. In fact, he was in the industry of marketing ideas and ideals. He employed a wide repertoire within the satirical genre, a rich political communication toolkit that included authenticity proxies and strategic placement, all tailored to the specific cause and the audience he targeted.

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[20] In the epitaph he composed for himself at the age of 22, Franklin defines himself as a printer, likens his body to a worn book, his life's work to its contents, and envisions "a new & more perfect edition" (Franklin 1728).

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