

Letters to the Editor

Allison Cavanagh • John Steel
Editors

Letters to the Editor

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Editors

Allison Cavanagh
Institute of Communication Studies
University of Leeds
Leeds, UK

John Steel
Department of Journalism Studies
University of Sheffield
Sheffield, UK

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FOREWORD

A volume offering a historical take on letters to the editor is both long overdue and welcome. Letters to the editor have historically formed a vital site for participation, capturing the preoccupations and views of ordinary citizens, as well as the tenor of the large and small debates animating local and national communities. The distinctive nature of letters renders them an indispensable source of information for scholars across social sciences and humanities fields.

Here, I will discuss two key reasons why this is so. First, for much of the history of mass media, letters to the editor were the main forum for debate in the public sphere, and therefore constitute a rich source of vernacular social and political history. Second, letters constitute carefully crafted contributions which are selected and curated by news organisations. This suggests that they represent what news organisations judge to be the most valuable contributions to debate, and makes them qualitatively different from digitally facilitated forms of participation as a genre and a practice. These features have methodological and conceptual implications which point to the continued relevance of the study of letters. At the same time, they highlight both continuity and change in relation to practices of mediated public participation.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AS VITAL FORUM FOR PUBLIC
DEBATE

The digital era has brought about a wealth of opportunities for participation in debate. If anything, the plethora of participatory opportunities afforded by digital platforms makes it easy to forget the vital role played by letters over hundreds of years of mediated public debate. It is therefore worth recalling that newspapers, ever since their emergence as the first mass medium, have always served as a vehicle for publishing letters (Wahl-Jorgensen 2007). The early history of newspapers was characterised by relatively small-scale operations run by a printer or editor, who brought together materials drawn from a range of external sources—including contributors sending in materials remotely. As a result, the line between the journalist and “correspondent” was often a blurry one. Early print publications made little distinction between opinion and news content, and, correspondingly, between letters to the editor and journalistic contributions. Indeed, some early newspapers were comprised almost entirely of letters to the editor (see Hobbs’ chapter in this volume). The genre of the letter was sometimes used as a vehicle for the publication of anonymous letters on contentious political issues. For example, the emerging British political press of the early eighteenth century, represented by publications such as *The Spectator*, made the critical opinion essay, in the form of a letter to the editor, a centre-piece of the newspaper. This included contributions such as the famous Cato’s letters, which took a radical approach by raising issues such as “the responsibilities of the government in protecting citizens, liberty and rights of citizens, representative government, and freedom of expression” (Hart 1970, p. 91).

However, the use of letters by professional writers for particular political purposes should not detract from their importance as a source of vernacular history, capturing the concerns of citizens in local communities. For example, as historian David Nord has documented, in late eighteenth-century Philadelphia, local residents wrote letters to the *Federal Gazette*, sharing their experience of a city in the grips of a yellow fever epidemic (Nord 2001, p. 199). The newspaper was seen as a crucial source of information necessary for survival. Readers—ordinary people, city officials and elite officials alike—created a discursive community, as a practice of active citizenship, by writing to the newspaper in their fight against the epidemic, “passing along rumors, offering folk cures and remedies, speculating

on the religious meaning of the disease, sharing their fears and their sorrows” (Nord 2001, pp. 200–201).

This example highlights the role of letters as a uniquely valuable resource for vernacular history. They not only can tell us about the dominant debates or prevailing public opinion in a particular time and place, but can also give access to the voices of individuals and groups who have been marginalised in historical accounts. For example, Thornton, Perkins and Varma, in their chapter for this volume, analyse responses to the 1929 stock market crash in the African-American newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*. The newspaper, described by the poet Langston Hughes as “the journalistic voice of a largely voiceless people,” enabled the construction of a discursive community premised on the sharing of experiences of racism, and of everyday lives occupied by concerns over survival over and above worries about the whims of the stock market.

Throughout the history of newspapers, letter-writing has been used as a political strategy by social movements and activists, including abolitionists, feminists and anti-war protesters—a strategy that persists to this day. Pedersen’s chapter for this volume examines women’s letters to Scottish newspapers in the important decade between 1918 and 1928. Newly enfranchised women were given voice and allowed to assert their claims to citizenship, generating a “feminine public sphere,” as Pedersen argues. For Chapman, writing on contributions to *Labour Woman* in the post-World War I era, the publication provided an opportunity for the cultivation of “gendered awareness” in the context of wide-ranging discussion which linked “politics to economic and class concerns.” Similarly, Cavanagh’s chapter, in examining the tone and topics of Victorian newspaper, showed that “the nineteenth century press provided a space in which the personal could become political.” Writing letters launched citizens into what they perceived as a sphere of empowerment, based on a view of newspapers as advocates for the people and vehicles for making claims to accountability.

Letters allow us to catch what are sometimes surprising and always revealing glimpses of how ordinary people make sense of major events and crises unfolding around them. As Milena Barrios and Gill document in their chapter on letters to the editor in Colombia from 1999 to 2008, the genre allowed for the public expression of emotion at a time of intense violence and disruption in the country. Letters served as a therapeutic “safety valve,” allowing citizens to vent their feelings (e.g. Davis and Rarick 1964; Lander 1972; Romanow et al. 1981). Beyond mere venting,

however, “emotional repertoires,” drawing on love, fear, anger, and sadness, emerged within the letters, and were “accompanied by a wide repertoire of terms used for characterizing and evaluating social events.” That is, talking about emotions in public created new ways of coming to terms with dramatic ongoing events, while making claims for social justice.

For historians, journalism scholars and others interested in accessing documentation of public debate, letters therefore constitute a distinctive source for accessing both dominant debates and marginalised voices; for understanding the impact of major social events across society, and for dramatising the ways in which ordinary people made sense of these events. This, in turn, also entails contestation of their meaning and attempts at bringing about justice and social change in the process.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AS CAREFULLY CRAFTED AND CURATED TEXTS

At the same time, we cannot understand letters as a straightforward representation of public opinion. Rather, they should be seen as carefully crafted and curated products of editorial processes (see also Wahl-Jorgensen 2004). They are brought into being through the co-creation of news workers and letter writers. As such, they are highly mediated through journalistic routines (Gregory and Hutchins 2004, p. 188), including those of editorial selectivity (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002). Such selectivity privileges letters that relate to content already on the news agenda, rather than those introducing radically new topics or ideas. Those selected for publication are “moulded” to fit journalistic criteria (see Hobbs’ chapter for this volume). Editorial processes including editing for language and length, with newsroom professionals occasionally going to great lengths to sharpen the contribution of letters they consider particularly important (e.g. Wahl-Jorgensen 2007). This mediation of letters through editorial processes means that they cannot be seen as a straightforward reflection of the prevailing public opinion, even if they have frequently been taken as such (e.g. Sigelman and Walkosz 1992, p. 938). On the other hand, letters editors have always been careful to represent a balance of opinions in published letters so that the section comes across as a legitimate forum for public debate (Wahl-Jorgensen 2007).

The curated and co-produced nature of letters distinguishes their form from that of more recently emerging opportunities for participation. The

emergence of online comments and discussion forums, user-generated content (UGC), followed by the arrival of social media have radically enhanced and transformed the ways that ordinary citizens can intervene. While these new forms, like letters, provide the opportunity for non-professionals to shape public debate, they differ dramatically in their form. Contemporary participatory interventions such as social media posts and below-the-line comments tend to provide immediate reactions and frequently come in the form of brief, off-the-cuff remarks. As Graham, Jackson and Wright note in their chapter for this volume, below-the-line comments on newspaper stories may be moderated, but do not tend to be selected and subject to the quality control and scrutiny shaping letters sections in newspapers. These features open up for more spontaneous reaction, debate and exchange, but also mean that such contributions should be understood as radically different types of interventions in the public sphere.

By contrast, letters to the editor are best understood not merely as *reactions* to ongoing debates, but rather as attempts at staking out particular positions, often in great detail and with significant rhetorical flourish. The Victorian letter writers that are the subject of Cavanagh's chapter cultivated a distinctive form of epistolary civility, frequently combined with performative theatricality. This points to the idea that newspaper audiences in general, and letter writers in particular, understand letters to the editor a particular genre with normalised (if dynamic) conventions, as a "stylistic and substantive responses to perceived situational demands" (Campbell and Jamieson 19). These rules are embodied in "recurrent patterns of language use" (Miller 1981, p. 163), including features such as the use of a "distanced, depersonalised tone" (see Cavanagh's chapter in this volume) which mirrors the style of objective journalism and suggests an alignment with rational understandings of citizenship. Along those lines, as de Silva's contribution to this book suggests, contemporary letter writers continue to see their role as one of generating thoughtful interventions to public debate. The goal of letter-writing is not merely to voice grievances, but also to demand a response and, ultimately, bring about social change (see also Cavanagh, Hobbs and de Torres Silva's chapters in this volume). This suggests that letters to the editor are understood, by readers and news organisations alike, as a privileged site for forms of public deliberation that might influence broader social, cultural and political developments.

Because of the distinctive nature of letters to the editor as a genre and resource of vernacular history, they are a veritable gold mine for scholars

across humanities and social sciences fields. This book takes the invaluable first step towards tapping into this ore and, in doing so, transforming our understanding of some of the most important political and social debates of times present and past, and the ways in which they are brought to life in letters to the editor.

Cardiff, UK

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Marta Milena Barrios is Associate Professor of Journalism at the undergraduate and graduate programmes of Communications at Universidad del Norte in Colombia. Her academic interests include the study of the relationship between society and informative media. Her research focuses mainly on the study of texts produced as a result of that relationship, including areas such as disaster coverage, political conflict, gender stereotypes and risk management. She is the author and co-author of journal articles and book chapters on these topics. Prior to joining academia, she was a radio and television reporter.

Allison Cavanagh works in the field of reader responses to media, in both contemporary and historical perspectives. She has worked with the BBC examining reader feedback on news and has written extensively on Victorian and Edwardian letters to the editor in UK newspapers, with a particular focus on issues of class, gender and the mediatization of the public sphere. Some of her recent publications on these topics include Cavanagh, A. (2016) *Ladies of the Times: Elite Women's Voices at the Turn of the Twentieth Century Journalism Studies*, and Cavanagh, A. (2013) "Barbarous cruelty at the British Museum": Mediatization, authority and reputation in nineteenth century England. *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communications Research*, 28(54).

Jane L. Chapman is Professor of Communications, University of Lincoln, UK, and Research Associate, Wolfson College Cambridge. Author of 12 books and 30 articles/book chapters, she is an editorial board member for several international journals. Previous awards include

the Colby Prize for Victorian Literature, and Emerald Publishing best academic article of the year. Chapman specialises in the comparative, transnational history of newspapers and illustrative satire, especially relating to newspaper communications by women and ethnic minorities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and her collaborative research in relation to the World Wars is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

Luis Manuel Gil has a BA in Communications and Journalism from Universidad del Norte, with an Erasmus Mundus MA degree in Journalism, Media and Globalization from Aarhus University/Danish School of Media and Journalism (Denmark) and Hamburg University (Germany). He has experience in qualitative research of media and virtual communities, journalism, public relations and creation of digital content. In Colombia, he participated in the Colciencias Young Researcher programme and was a Colfuturo Scholar; and in Europe, he was awarded the Erasmus+ grant from the European Commission.

Todd Graham is a University Academic Fellow in Political Communication and Journalism at the University of Leeds. His research focuses on (1) the use of new media in representative democracies; (2) the intersections between popular culture and formal politics; (3) online election campaigns; (4) social media and journalism; (5) forms of online deliberation and political talk; (6) online civic engagement; (7) and public sphere and deliberative democratic theory.

Andrew Hobbs is a senior lecturer in the School of Journalism, Media & Performance at the University of Central Lancashire. He is interested in English provincial print cultures and local and regional identities, particularly newspapers and magazines of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Recent publications include the open-access book, *A Fleet Street in Every Town: The provincial press in England, 1855–1900* (2018), and a chapter on provincial periodicals in the award-winning *Routledge Handbook to Nineteenth-Century Periodicals and Newspapers* (2016). He is a former journalist.

Daniel Jackson is Associate Professor of Media and Communication at Bournemouth University. His research broadly explores the intersections of media, power and democracy, including news coverage of politics, the construction of news, political communication and the dynamics of civic culture in online environments. He has edited five books and is co-editor

of the election analysis reports, published within ten days of major electoral events. Jackson is former convenor of the Political Studies Association's Media and Politics Group and convenor of the Journalism Research Group at Bournemouth University.

Sarah Pedersen is Professor of Communication and Media at Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen. The focus of her research is women's engagement with the media, using both contemporary and historical sources. She researches and publishes on women's use of both contemporary social media and daily newspapers at the turn of the twentieth century and is particularly interested in women's use of media for political purposes. Her book, *The Scottish Suffragettes and the Press*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2017 and she is working on a book entitled *The Politicisation of Mumsnet*. She is Associate Editor of the academic journal *Women's Studies International Forum*.

Stephynie C. Perkins is an associate professor in the School of Communication at University of North Florida. She also directs the graduate programme in communication. She holds a PhD from University of Florida.

John Steel is a senior lecturer in the Department of Journalism Studies at the University of Sheffield. Since completing his PhD in 2001, Steel has produced more than 30 publications with leading international publishers and in major peer-reviewed journals. Broadly, Steel's work spans Media History, Journalism Studies and Political Communication. He is a Principal Investigator on an AHRC-funded project examining press freedom and journalism ethics across thirteen European countries.

Brian Thornton is a professor in the School of Communication at University of North Florida. He holds a PhD from the University of Utah. He has published 15 academic articles studying the history and content of letters to the editor.

Marisa Torres da Silva is an assistant professor of journalism and audience studies at the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, NOVA University of Lisbon (NOVA FCSH), Portugal. Her master and doctoral dissertations (both published as books, 2007 and 2014) focused on letters to the editor in the Portuguese press. Her research interests include the relationship between journalism, democracy and audiences, news

consumption and audience research, media diversity and pluralism, gender and journalism and cultural journalism.

Tulika Varma is an assistant professor in the School of Communication at University of North Florida. She holds a PhD from Louisiana State University.

Scott Wright is Associate Professor in Political Communication at the University of Melbourne. His research is interested in everyday online political talk, moderation and interface design, super-participation, online activism, e-democracy and how technology is impacting journalism practice. His most recent work explores tech journalism. He has published in journals such as *New Media & Society*, *Press/Politics*, *Information, Communication & Society* and the *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* amongst many others.

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