

Benjamin Franklin: Apology for Printers

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Being frequently censur'd and condemn'd by different Persons for printing Things which they say ought not to be printed, I have sometimes thought it might be necessary to make a standing Apology for my self, and publish it once a Year, to be read upon all Occasions of that Nature. Much Business has hitherto hindered the execution of this Design; but having very lately given extraordinary Offence by printing an Advertisement with a certain "N.B." at the End of it, I find an Apology more particularly requisite at this Juncture, tho' it happens when I have not yet Leisure to write such a thing in the proper Form, and can only in a loose manner throw those Considerations together which should have been the Substance of it.

I request all who are angry with me on the Account of printing things they don't like, calmly to consider these following Particulars

1. That the Opinions of Men are almost as various as their Faces; an Observation general enough to become a common Proverb, "So many Men so many Minds."
2. That the Business of Printing has chiefly to do with Mens Opinions; most things that are printed tending to promote some, or oppose others.
3. That hence arises the peculiar Unhappiness of that Business, which other Callings are no way liable to; they who follow Printing being scarce able to do any thing in their way of getting a Living, which shall not probably give Offence to some, and perhaps to many; whereas the Smith, the Shoemaker, the Carpenter, or the Man of any other Trade, may work indifferently for People of all Persuasions, without offending any of them: and the Merchant may buy and sell with Jews, Turks, Hereticks, and Infidels of all sorts, and get Money by every one of them, without giving Offence to the most orthodox, of any sort; or suffering the least Censure or Ill-will on the Account from any Man whatever.
4. That it is as unreasonable in any one Man or Set of Men to expect to be pleas'd with every thing that is printed, as to think that nobody ought to be pleas'd but themselves.
5. Printers are educated in the Belief, that when Men differ in Opinion, both Sides ought equally to have the Advantage of being heard by the Publick; and that when Truth and Error have fair Play, the former is always an overmatch for the latter: Hence they chearfully serve all contending Writers that pay them well, without regarding on which side they are of the Question in Dispute.
6. Being thus continually employ'd in serving all Parties, Printers naturally acquire a vast Unconcernedness as to the right or wrong Opinions contain'd in what they print; regarding it only as the Matter of their daily labour: They print things full of Spleen and Animosity, with the utmost Calmness and Indifference, and without the least Ill-will to the Persons reflected on; who nevertheless unjustly think the Printer as much their Enemy as the Author, and join both together in their Resentment.
7. That it is unreasonable to imagine Printers approve of every thing they print, and to censure them on any particular thing accordingly; since in the way of their Business they print such great variety of things opposite and contradictory. It is likewise as unreasonable what some assert, "That Printers ought not to print any Thing but what they approve;" since if all of that Business should

make such a Resolution, and abide by it, an End would thereby be put to Free Writing, and the World would afterwards have nothing to read but what happen'd to be the Opinions of Printers.

8. That if all Printers were determin'd not to print any thing till they were sure it would offend no body, there would be very little printed.

9. That if they sometimes print vicious or silly things not worth reading, it may not be because they approve such things themselves, but because the People are so viciously and corruptly educated that good things are not encouraged. I have known a very numerous Impression of "Robin Hood's Songs" go off in this Province at 2"s". per Book, in less than a Twelvemonth; when a small Quantity of "David's Psalms" (an excellent Version) have lain upon my Hands above twice the Time.

10. That notwithstanding what might be urg'd in behalf of a Man's being allow'd to do in the Way of his Business whatever he is paid for, yet Printers do continually discourage the Printing of great Numbers of bad things, and stifle them in the Birth. I my self have constantly refused to print any thing that might countenance Vice, or promote Immorality; tho' by complying in such Cases with the corrupt Taste of the Majority, I might have got much Money. I have also always refus'd to print such things as might do real Injury to any Person, how much soever I have been solicited, and tempted with Offers of great Pay; and how much soever I have by refusing got the Ill-will of those who would have employ'd me. I have heretofore fallen under the Resentment of large Bodies of Men, for refusing absolutely to print any of their Party or Personal Reflections. In this Manner I have made my self many Enemies, and the constant Fatigue of denying is almost insupportable. But the Publick being unacquainted with all this, whenever the poor Printer happens either through Ignorance or much Persuasion, to do any thing that is generally thought worthy of Blame, he meets with no more Friendship or Favour on the above Account, than if there were no Merit in't at all. Thus, as "Waller" says,

"Poets loose half the Praise they would have got Were it but known what they discreetly blot;" Yet are censur'd for every bad Line found in their Works with the utmost Severity.

I come now to the particular Case of the "N.B." above-mention'd, about which there has been more Clamour against me, than ever before on any other Account. -- In the Hurry of other Business an Advertisement was brought to me to be printed; it signified that such a Ship lying at such a Wharff, would sail for "Barbadoes" in such a Time, and that Freighters and Passengers might agree with the Captain at such a Place; so far is what's common: But at the Bottom this odd Thing was added, N.B. "No Sea Hens nor Black Gowns will be admitted on any Terms." I printed it, and receiv'd my Money; and the Advertisement was stuck up round the Town as usual. I had not so much Curiosity at that time as to enquire the Meaning of it, nor did I in the least imagine it would give so much Offence. Several good Men are very angry with me on this Occasion; they are pleas'd to say I have too much Sense to do such things ignorantly; that if they were Printers they would not have done such a thing on any Consideration; that it could proceed from nothing but my abundant Malice against Religion and the Clergy: They therefore declare they will not take any more of my Papers, nor have any farther Dealings with me; but will hinder me of all the Custom they can. All this is very hard!

I believe it had been better if I had refused to print the said Advertisement. However, 'tis done and cannot be revok'd. I have only the following few Particulars to offer, some of them in my Behalf, by way of Mitigation, and some not much to the Purpose; but I desire none of them may be read when the Reader is not in a very good Humour.

1. That I really did it without the least Malice, and imagin'd the "N.B." was plac'd there only to make the Advertisement star'd at, and more generally read.

2. That I never saw the Word "Sea-Hens" before in my Life; nor have I yet ask'd the meaning of it; and tho' I had certainly known that "Black Gowns" in that Place signified the Clergy of the Church of "England", yet I have that confidence in the generous good Temper of such of them as I know, as to be well satisfied such a trifling mention of their Habit gives them no Disturbance.

3. That most of the Clergy in this and the neighbouring Provinces, are my Customers, and some of them my very good Friends; and I must be very malicious indeed, or very stupid, to print this thing for a small Profit, if I had thought it would have given them just Cause of Offence.

4. That if I have much Malice against the Clergy, and withal much Sense; 'tis strange I never write or talk against the Clergy my self. Some have observed that 'tis a fruitful Topic, and the easiest to be witty upon of all others. I can print any thing I write at less Charge than others; yet I appeal to the Publick that I am never guilty this way, and to all my Acquaintance as to my Conversation.

5. That if a Man of Sense had Malice enough to desire to injure the Clergy, this is the foolishhest Thing he could possibly contrive for that Purpose.

6. That I got Five Shillings by it.

7. That none who are angry with me would have given me so much to let it alone.

8. That if all the People of different Opinions in this Province would engage to give me as much for not printing things they don't like, as I can get by printing them, I should probably live a very easy Life; and if all Printers were every where so dealt by, there would be very little printed.

9. That I am oblig'd to all who take my Paper, and am willing to think they do it out of meer Friendship. I only desire they would think the same when I deal with them. I thank those who leave off, that they have taken it so long. But I beg they would not endeavour to dissuade others, for that will look like Malice.

10. That 'tis impossible any Man should know what he would do if he was a Printer.

11. That notwithstanding the Rashness and Inexperience of Youth, which is most likely to be prevail'd with to do things that ought not to be done; yet I have avoided printing such Things as usually give Offence either to Church or State, more than any Printer that has followed the Business in this Province before.

12. And lastly, That I have printed above a Thousand Advertisements which made not the least mention of "Sea-Hens" or "Black Gowns"; and this being the first Offence, I have the more Reason to expect Forgiveness.

...

I consider the Variety of Humours among Men, and despair of pleasing every Body; yet I shall not therefore leave off Printing. I shall continue my Business. I shall not burn my Press and melt my Letters.

Presentism as Context

How do we situate the primary source in a context to consider this in light of current events? Presentism, which Wineburg defines as “the act of viewing the past through the lens of the present,” can provide a context for the source. However, we must be very careful to make comparisons between the contemporary period and the past that are nuanced. We do not want students to come away with the idea that people of the past share the same concerns and worldview as we do today.

Contemporary Media and Ben Franklin’s An Apology for Printers (1731)

While U.S. media outlets purport to report on the news with an unbiased objective method, only 45% of Americans say they have a “great deal of confidence” in the accuracy of our news (Gallup poll, 10-1-2009). According to the same poll, Americans responded that, “45% say the media are too liberal, while 15% say too conservative and 35% say they are just about right.” In a recent NPR story, the editor of the *Washington Post* argued that with regard his paper, “We are transparent about where we’re coming from. And our reporting speaks for itself. It is not coming from a point of view” (Morning Edition, 1-05-2011).

How does Ben Franklin address his own bias as a printer and newspaper author?

How does the source allude to the readerships’ beliefs and understanding about bias and point of view in the colonial American media?

The Context of Purpose

One of the ways we try to situate a primary source's context is by understanding the author's purpose and the conversation in which the author was engaged. Though the process of understanding the audience and author of a primary source can be like constructing a puzzle "in which pieces are slotted into pre-existing frames," which Wineburg cautions us against, it is nevertheless extremely useful to foreground our analysis with a thoughtful consideration of the immediate topic of discussion. In Ben Franklin's 1731 "Apology for Printers," he makes it clear that he was inspired by criticism that he received after printing an announcement of a ship's sailing that included a reference to "Sea Hens and Black Gowns." Franklin may well have had a larger agenda in mind, but for this exercise, try to keep your analysis focused on the immediate purpose of his "Apology."

Questions to guide reading and discussion:

1. What was the immediate controversy that inspired Ben Franklin to write the "Apology"? (Please note that Franklin's discussion of the controversy comes particularly on the third page, in the paragraph that begins, "I come now to the particular case...")
2. Ben Franklin was a well-known deist. In 1728, while just 22 years old, he published a pamphlet titled "Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion," which outlined a model for deist worship, which sees reason and observation as the best means to understand the universe's creator, not organized religion. Such beliefs put him at odds with church leaders, a topic which he discussed in his autobiography. How does the episode related in the "Apology" shed light on Franklin's relationship with organized religion in colonial America?



Spatial Context

Historians often consider a variety of contexts to gain a deeper understanding of the primary source under investigation. By examining a source through a spatial context we must situate the source in a specific location--whether local, national, and/or international—and examine the source in relation to other events going on at that time. You can imagine this type of contextuality as a lens or a microscope that looks initially at the local trends, ideas, and events that are important for the creation of the source. Then shifting the lens further outward we can consider the national or regional context of the source. Finally, a consideration of the international scope of the source and how global influences shape the creator of the source can be considered. Situating Franklin’s “An Apology for Printers” in a spatial context allows us to consider the important role of Philadelphia as a metropolis in colonial America with its own history of inclusiveness that is unique in this period. Franklin points out that he printed an advertisement for a ship traveling to Barbados, reminding us that Franklin and the residents of Philadelphia were part of a larger colonial network. Finally, Franklin’s concerns with the press and religion or important topics of discussion and debate that were important throughout the Western world during this period of the Enlightenment and increased interconnection throughout the Atlantic world.

After reading Franklin’s “Apology,” do you think it was directed at a local readership, or one of a broader scale (say intercolonial, or international)? Why?

How does Franklin characterize the local discussions of religion through the media? How does Franklin characterize his own contributions to this discussion?

Why are the ideas that Franklin presents important for illuminating our understanding of the role of American colonists in engaging in Enlightenment discussions of open intellectual exchange?



The Temporal Context

Historical actors, even those as timelessly inspirational as Benjamin Franklin, were actual people who experienced a physical life in a particular place and time. We know this, but too often our attempts to understand the lessons of their lives are disconnected from the realities of the historical moment in which they lived. This is why Wineburg warns us against trying to analyze historical actors too quickly through the lens of the present. Benjamin Franklin was clearly a man of his time, and his “Apology for Printers” (1731) was a product of the era in which he lived. Some of the realities of Franklin’s era that might help us to contextualize the “Apology” include:

- Printing throughout the British domain was strictly controlled until Parliament allowed the Licensing Act to expire in 1695.
- Through the 1730s, printers in the colonies required official permission and license to conduct their work, and government contracts were the principal source of income for most colonial printers.
- The first colonial newspaper appeared in 1704. By 1727, there were 5 (three in Boston, 1 in Philadelphia, and 1 in New York), and there were 12 throughout the colonies in 1740.
- In 1726 a printer named Peter Zenger began work in New York. Zenger’s newspaper, *The New York Weekly Journal* was first published in 1733 and quickly began criticizing activities of the colonial governor. A New York jury’s refusal in 1735 to convict Zenger of seditious libel has been identified as a crucial turning point toward freedom of the press in America.

Questions:

1. What does this timeline of printing in the British colonies add to your reading of Franklin’s “Apology for Printers”?
2. How does Franklin’s “Apology” help you understand the evolution of freedom of the press in colonial America?