

'This folio of four pages, happy work!' – Cowper and the Newspapers

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The best-known passage from *The Task*, and one which established the image of Cowper as the home-loving poet of fireside retreat contemplating the world 'at a distance', is the description from the beginning of Book IV, 'The Winter Evening', of the newspaper's arrival and perusal. A painting which hangs in the Cowper and Newton Museum, attributed to J. Tate Grey and dated 1891, embodies the iconic power of the passage; it depicts Cowper reading the paper to Mrs Unwin and Lady Austen while 'the bubbling and loud-hissing urn / Throws up a steamy column, and the cups / That cheer but not inebriate, wait on each' (IV, 38-40).¹ The painting, like the poem, emphasizes the domestic sobriety of Cowper's reading situation, in contrast to many images of newspaper reading from the later eighteenth century, which tended to locate the practice in disreputable or drunken contexts, such as coffee-houses, taverns, and inns. (In 1780, a letter which appeared in several London and provincial papers observed that without newspapers 'our Coffee-Houses, Ale-Houses, and Barbers-Shops, would undergo a Change next to Depopulation.'²)

In her 2010 study of the Romantic period entitled *War at a Distance*, Mary Favret offers a detailed reading of the newspaper sequence in 'The Winter Evening', arguing that Cowper here defines the predicament of the modern subject in a time of war, 'lib'rated and exempted' by distance, and yet emotionally involved in the wider world.³ Favret's reading is nuanced and far-reaching, and yet somewhat partial; much of Cowper's description in 'The Winter Evening' of the world revealed through 'this folio of four pages, happy work!' (IV, 50) has nothing to do with war, but is concerned with more cheerful and even comic topics, such that his observation from elsewhere in *The Task*, 'Variety's the very spice of life' might be aptly invoked to describe the appeal of the newspapers.⁴ Taking this passage from *The Task* as a springboard, this essay will explore the complex role which newspapers played in Cowper's life and work. It will also

attend to the ways in which Cowper related his reading to what he gleaned from other sources via the social media of his day – conversation, gossip, and, in particular, letters. Although Cowper’s fascination with news is at its most intense during the composition of *The Task*, it remains a vital interest throughout his life, and the news-hungry, political Cowper that emerges from a thorough reading of his letters challenges our vision of the rural recluse, the stricken deer. Much of Cowper’s work is suffused with a complex awareness of the interplay between private and public worlds, or between home and away, which is perfectly embodied in the material practice of newspaper reading.

Early in 1782, Cowper’s friend John Thornton wrote to Benjamin Franklin sending a volume of Cowper’s poems and describing him as ‘a friend of mine who has been many years excluded from the World, as not being in his right Mind and considers himself as a Non Entity and reads nothing beyond a News paper’.⁵ Franklin wrote back thanking Thornton and admiring the book – ‘I have read the whole with great pleasure’ – and Cowper reports all of this, with evident pride, in a letter to William Unwin. However, Cowper concludes this very same letter by declaring that, thanks to recent jingoistic reporting of events in America, ‘the Newspapers and their Correspondents disgust me and make me sick’.⁶ Just in this brief exchange we see the importance of newspaper reading to Cowper, but also the reaction of dismay which it often provoked. He writes to Lady Hesketh in October 1787 that ‘the pertness of the Herald is my detestation, yet I always read it; and why? because it is a newspaper, and should therefore doubtless read it were it ten times more disgusting than it is’.⁷ Sometimes it’s the ‘pertness’ of the journalists which offends him, while at other times he complains about the substance of the news itself. ‘I read the News—I see that things go wrong in every quarter’, he writes to Hill in January 1781, claiming to prefer his cucumbers to politics; and elsewhere in *The Task* he fantasizes about eschewing the concerns of the world entirely:

Oh for a lodge in some vast wilderness,
Some boundless contiguity of shade,
Where rumour of oppression or deceit,
Of unsuccessful or successful war,
Might never reach me more. My ear is pain’d,
My soul is sick, with ev’ry day’s report
Of wrong and outrage with which earth is fill’d.

(*The Task*, Book II, 'The Timepiece', 1-7)

Even when at his most depressed, however, he still seems to have read the papers; he concludes a letter to Samuel Rose in January 1794 by observing that 'Were I less absorbed in miserable Self than I am, the horrid condition of Europe, and especially the affairs of England, would touch me deeply. But, as it is, whether towns are taken and battles won or lost, seems to affect me little'.⁸ Yet, disgusting though the papers sometimes were to him, Cowper seems to have read them almost every day. He seems to have seen various local papers on an irregular basis (*The Northampton Mercury* and the *Buckinghamshire Herald*), and the letters contain many references to the practical business of regularly obtaining the London papers. He habitually took in the fairly conservative *General Evening Post*; in March 1780 he writes to Hill that 'I know nothing, but what I learn from the General Evening'.⁹ In December 1786, he writes to Lady Hesketh that he's had a letter from Bagot, who 'rallies me in it on the subject of my celebrity, and tells me of Odes that he sees in the public prints and other pretty things composed to my honour. I however see them not. Perhaps I should do well to give notice by advertisement to all Gentlemen posts and others who feel themselves inclined to praise me, that I take in only the General Evening and the Gentleman's Magazine, consequently that their good things will be lost on me, if published in any other papers'.¹⁰ Cowper's household also sometimes took (or simply borrowed) slightly racier newspapers such as the *St James's Chronicle* and the *Morning Chronicle*, both of which had good provincial circulation. In February 1782, Cowper reports to Newton that they can obtain the *Morning Chronicle* six days a week in Olney via a local supplier, for 3s 3d per quarter, which is more reliable than ordering it direct in the mail from London.¹¹

Cowper also seems to have hoarded newspapers in the house, if we are to believe what he writes to Newton in August 1781, in response to a query about whether some of Newton's papers had been left at Olney on his last visit: '[they] certainly are not here. Our servants never touch a paper without leave, and are so observant of our Injunction, in this particular, that unless I burn the covers of the News, they accumulate till they make a litter in the parlour'.¹²

Thornton's account in the letter to Franklin of Cowper reading 'nothing beyond a News paper' is clearly overdone. However, at many points in his letters, Cowper insists that he reads very few books, since they are expensive and hard to come by in Buckinghamshire. 'My studies

... are very much confined and of little use, because I have no books but what I borrow,' he complains to Newton in April 1783.¹³ If house guests are anticipated, he often advises them to bring their own reading matter, as when he writes to Lady Hesketh in April 1786, 'Should you wish for books at Olney, you must bring them with you or you will wish in vain', or to William Hayley in April 1792 that books 'are an article with which I am *heinously unprovided*'.¹⁴ This is a bit disingenuous – his letters also reveal that friends often sent or loaned him books, especially books of travel and religious literature – but Cowper remains one of the least bookish of poets: 'not one of the Literati,' as he described himself to Hayley.¹⁵ His keen interest in the daily news and his talent for writing poems inspired by current events which could also transcend the merely topical doubtless contributed to his popularity with the reading public, at a time when notions of good citizenship were increasingly bound up with a growing appreciation of the British press and the liberty which it helped to protect.¹⁶

In 'The Winter Evening,' Cowper is less concerned with the abstract 'freedom of the press' and much more interested in the almost physical power of the newspaper to compel the reader's 'inquisitive attention,' keeping him 'fast bound in chains of silence' as he absorbs the amazing variety of human experience which the newspaper unfolds, this 'map of busy life' (*The Task*, IV, 50-5). Cowper pursues the map conceit at some length, making the newspaper a moral geography of contemporary life, ranging from the heights of political and social self-importance – 'the mountainous and craggy ridge / That tempts ambition' (IV, 57-8) – down to the 'wilderness of strange / But gay confusion' (IV, 78-9) – the advertisements and crazy announcements so characteristic of eighteenth-century news-sheets. The newspaper is map-like in other ways. Its contents describe events across the globe; it relies upon readers knowing how to make sense of its odd layout and sign systems; its awkwardly large size makes it more challenging than a book to hold and read; and it makes readers, especially those of a certain age, squint closely to figure it out (several eighteenth-century readers complain about the increasingly small print of newspapers, and 'the injury done to the Sight' by 'reading so minute a Character';¹⁷ since they were taxed per sheet, printers had to cram as much as possible into a small space, to avoid adding extra pages).

The chaotic layout of the papers is something Cowper writes about in his letters. Unlike newspapers today, eighteenth-century ones observed almost no hierarchy of contents, such that a description of a new play might be a large item on page one, while important court or military

news would be hidden away in the middle of page three. Writing to Unwin in March 1782, Cowper exclaims: ‘What a medley are our public prints. Half the page filled with the ruin of the country, and the other half with the vices and pleasures of it! Here an Island taken, and there a new comedy, here an Empire lost, and there an Italian Opera, or the Duke of Gloucester’s rout on a Sunday!’¹⁸ The advertisements seem particularly to have intrigued him, as we see not only in *The Task*’s wonderful catalogue of products and events, but also at various points in the *Letters*, such as when (in June 1788) he offers to send Lady Hesketh an ‘extravagantly ludicrous’ advertisement by ‘a Dancing master of Newport-pagnel’, for her ‘amusement’.¹⁹

WONDERS! WONDERSS! WONDERS! and WONDERS! are now to be seen at No. 24, Piccadilly, till the first of April next, and no longer.

KATTERFELTO, as a Divine and Moral Philosopher, begs leave to say, that all Persons on earth live in darknes, if they are able to see, but won't observe that wonderful Exhibition on the SOLAR MICROSCOPE. He will this, and every day this week, and from Ten in the morning till Five in the afternoon, shew a reat variety of surprising and uncommon

NEW OCCULT SECRETS,
 And such as has surprized the King and the whole Royal Family, and many of the first Nobility in the city. And by his new-improved and greatly-admired SOLAR MICROSCOPE, there will be seen in a drop of water the size of a pin's head, above five thousand insects; the same in beer, milk, vinegar, blood, flour, cheese, Marchalle powder, and two hundred other uncommon objects; and those insects are now to be seen to the greatest advantage; and all those Ladies and Gentlemen that have tickets, are requested to come the first fine sun-shiny day, as those tickets will be of no use to them after the first of April next.

And this and every Evening this week, precisely at Seven o'clock, he will deliver his other various Lectures in Natural Experimental Philosophy and Mathematics, and his various Lectures and Experiments are as follow, viz.

Philosophical,	Physical,	Proetic,
Mathematical,	Chymical,	Stenographic,
Optical,	Pneumatic,	Balancical, and
Magnetical,	Hydraulic,	Caprimantic Art.
Electrical,	Hydrostratic,	

And after his Lecture, Mr. or Mrs. Katterfelto will shew and discover several New Deceptions on

Dice, Cards,	Silver and Gold,
Billiards, Tennis,	Boxes, Medals,
Letters, Money,	Pyramidical Glasses,
Watches, Caskets,	Mechanical Clocks &c.

Admittance, Front Seats 3s. Second Seats 2s. Back for Servant, 1s. only.

The whole are delivered in twelve different nights; a different Lecture every night.

N.B. This Evening he will surprize the company beyond all description. *Mg. Chron. March 24 1785*

Advertisement from *The Morning Chronicle* which inspired Cowper’s vignette of ‘Katterfelto with his hair on end / At his own wonders, wond’ring for his bread’ (‘The Winter Evening’, 86-7).

There is a striking similarity between Cowper's sense of the newspaper's crazy riches and a 'letter to the editor' published in several London and provincial papers in 1780 and signed, mysteriously, 'WC':

Sir, I have often observed, that there is not so inconsistent, so incoherent, so heterogeneous, although so useful and agreeable a Thing, as a Publick Newspaper: The very ludicrous Contrast in Advertisements, the contradictory Substance of foreign and domestic Paragraphs, the opposite Opinions and Observations of contending Essayists, with premature Deaths, spurious Marriages, Births, Bankruptcies, &c. &c. form a Fund of Entertainment for a World, of which it is in itself no bad Epitome.

The letter goes on to describe the newspaper as a 'Bill of Fare, containing all the Luxuries, as well as the Necessaries of Life. *Politicks* are now the *Roast-Beef* of the Times, and a Dish equally sumptuous to the King and the Cobbler'.²⁰ Doubtless many Cowperians would be delighted if this correspondent turned out to be Cowper himself, who in 'The Winter Evening' famously celebrates how the 'deep research' of the newspaper intelligence-gatherer provides 'a rich repast for me' (IV, 112-13). Alas, 'WC' turns out to be a fairly prolific writer of letters to the press who likely hails from Chester.²¹ However, our own Cowper is highly likely to have read the letter, since it appeared in various newspapers over several months in 1780, and he may well have been doubly motivated to read it because of the coincidence of his own and the writer's initials.

Cowper wrote many poems in response to newspaper stories. The most compassionate of these include the influential anti-slavery poems and 'On the Loss of the Royal George'. Several of these ended up or indeed were first published in newspapers or in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the chief vehicle for Cowper's occasional verse. He seems not himself to have taken the *Gentleman's Magazine* regularly, but he managed to borrow copies from a neighbour who did – in October 1785 he writes Lady Hesketh that he does not 'take it in' and a couple of months later he describes borrowing a copy from a neighbouring 'watchmaker ... who takes in the said Magazine for a gentleman at some distance'.²² Much of the detail which makes his anti-slavery poems so powerful was garnered from his careful perusal of parliamentary debates on the slave-trade, which the newspapers reprinted word for word. He also wrote several highly political poems, some of which tend to be too topical to work very well for readers today, such as 'On the

Victory Gained by Sir George Rodney’; a sonnet on his young cousin’s recitation of documents in the House of Lords during the trial of Warren Hastings; and a satire on Lord Gordon, instigator of the 1780 anti-Catholic riots, which makes it clear that Cowper had been following Gordon’s colourful career in the newspapers with almost obsessive attention to detail.²³ In 1781, he had to make last-minute changes to the proof sheets of *Poems* in light of current events; he excised some anti-Catholic lines from ‘Expostulation’ which now seemed too inflammatory after the Gordon Riots, and he removed two poems which Cornwallis’s defeat at Yorktown had rendered obsolete (‘A Present for the Queen of France’ and ‘To Sir Joshua Reynolds’).²⁴

Although reformist in many of his political views, Cowper was fascinated by royal news, especially reports of the King’s illness and recovery. In November 1788, he complains to Samuel Rose about the gloatingly gloomy tone of reports on the King’s health: ‘We mourn daily for the King, and three times in the week, execrate the malignity and Viperism of the *Morning Herald*’.²⁵ He sent occasional poems on royal affairs to the newspapers, often using William Unwin or Lady Hesketh as his intermediary. ‘Annus Memorabilis 1789: A Poem Written in Commemoration of His Majesty’s Happy Recovery’ was apparently published in the *Morning Herald* in March or April of 1789 (though no copy has been found),²⁶ and on 15 June 1789 his poem ‘On the Queen’s Nocturnal Visit to London, March 17, 1789’ appeared in *The Times*.²⁷ In July 1789, responding to detailed reports of the royal family’s holiday at Weymouth, Cowper wrote ‘On the Benefit Received by his Majesty from Sea-Bathing’; the poem appeared in the *Whitehall Evening Post* for 16-18 July 1789, which also provided a casual snippet of information from Paris, ‘The Palace of Versailles is guarded by three lines of soldiers’ – an ironic conjunction of Revolutionary simmerings abroad with royalist pride at home.

A handful of Cowper’s poems were inspired by affecting tales from the provinces which were reprinted in the London religious press (publications such as the *Arminian Magazine* and the *Spiritual Register*) and thence made it into the mainstream London papers as well as other provincial organs (local news often in this way became gradually national). He was attracted to tales of cruelty to animals or of wicked people miraculously struck dead in their tracks by divine wrath (‘The Cockfighter’s Garland’ and ‘A Tale, founded on a Fact, which happened in January, 1779’), and also wrote ‘A Tale’ inspired by a report of a chaffinch nesting on a Scottish ship; the manuscript of the poem incorporates a pasted clipping of the newspaper story.²⁸

Some of Cowper's interventions were motivated by more personal concerns. In 1792, he sent a sonnet in praise of Wilberforce to the *Northampton Mercury* in order to quell a rumour which had originated in Olney gossip and spread as far as London, presumably via the newspapers, that he had become a supporter of the slave trade.²⁹ The Wilberforce sonnet appeared in the *Northampton Mercury* for 21 April 1792, prefaced by a letter in which Cowper entreats the editor 'to take an early opportunity to insert in your paper the following lines, written ... expressly for the two purposes of doing just honour to the gentleman with whose name they are inscribed, and of vindicating myself from an aspersion so injurious'.³⁰ The next number of the newspaper (28 April 1792) published a sonnet signed 'S. M'Clellan' complimenting Cowper on his own poem; Cowper took this as evidence that his sonnet has 'answer'd its purpose'.³¹ Cowper's sonnet pays detailed attention to reports in, for instance, the *General Evening Post* of Wilberforce's speech in the House of Commons on 2 April; and his modifications to the sonnet's closing lines reflect the setback Wilberforce suffered on 26 April when a suggested amendment by Dundas to abolish slavery *gradually* (by 1800) was adopted.³²

If the Wilberforce sonnet shows us Cowper standing up for principles as well as defending his own reputation, other of his entanglements with the press were less noble. In May 1786, he rather naughtily wrote a riposte to a critical letter on his Homer translation which had appeared in the *Public Advertiser*; he arranged for General Cowper in London to send the letter, thus disguising its origins, and signed it, 'a Well-Wisher to the New Translation'.³³ He describes this ruse in a letter to Lady Hesketh with no apparent qualms about his own duplicity.³⁴ In November 1783, he reveals in a letter to Hill that 'I send nothing to the papers myself, but Unwin sometimes sends, for me. His receptacle of my squibs is the Public Advertiser', a confession which suggests an unknowable quantity of such interventions.³⁵ And we know that he was not above using fake initials, for instance, 'T. H.' for the sonnet on Henry Cowper's role in the Hastings trial.³⁶

Not surprisingly for a poet who wrote so many poems in response to contemporary events, Cowper comments in his letters on many things which he reads about in the newspapers. Almost every letter he writes makes some kind of observation on current affairs, and his range of interests is enormous. The following list is by no means comprehensive, and cannot feasibly be referenced in full, but serves to give a general sense of the things that he commented upon: the American Revolutionary War and subsequent peace treaties; the trial of Warren Hastings;

Parliamentary debates, especially over Reform and Abolition, and especially the speeches of Burke; the rise of Pitt the younger and his unfair taxes; the illness and recovery of George III as well as of his old school friend George Colman at Bath; the Gordon Riots and the Birmingham Riots; the decadence of the Prince Regent;³⁷ the French Revolution and its degeneration into the Terror ('I wait with trembling ears for the News from Paris');³⁸ the antics of Catherine the Great, 'the Russian virago ... an impertinent Puss';³⁹ the great earthquake in Southern Italy ('What havoc in Calabria!')⁴⁰ and the great West Indian hurricane, as well as bad weather in other parts of England;⁴¹ the wonders of that new invention, the hot air balloon ('I have been crossing the Channel in a Balloon ever since I read of that achievement by Blanchard');⁴² the sinking of ships, especially the Royal George; the settlement of Botany Bay and the African Colonization Society's attempts to resettle Sierra Leone;⁴³ the debauchery of University life;⁴⁴ promotions and pensions awarded to his cousin Mr Madan and his old school friend Lord Thurlow, as well as Thurlow's unsuccessful request that the King increase Dr Johnson's pension;⁴⁵ and marriages or deaths of friends, family and acquaintances. Even news of illnesses, if they afflict celebrity friends, reaches Cowper via the papers, as we see in December 1785 when he learns of the illness and later recovery of George Colman from 'the News', prompting him to write to Colman after a silence of some twenty years.⁴⁶

Often the letters evoke a more chastened response than the sense of voyeuristic superiority which characterises 'The Winter Evening,' where Cowper enjoys being able 'through the loop-holes of retreat / To peep at such a world. To see the stir / Of the great Babel and not feel the crowd' (88-90); 'sitting and surveying thus at ease / The globe and its concerns,' feeling 'advanced / To some secure and more than mortal height, / That lib'rates and exempts me from them all' (94-7). The slight smugness of this position seems unconsciously to be rebuked in a letter he writes to Unwin in March 1785. He describes his vexation at not having received any proof-sheets of *The Task* from Johnson recently, and being annoyed yet again when the evening's post brought nothing, but then chastises his self pity:

... none came, and I felt myself a little mortified. I took up the Newspaper however and read it. There I found that the Emperor and the Dutch are, after all their negotiations going to war. Such reflections as these struck me. A great part of Europe is going to be involved in the greatest of calamities. Troops are in motion. Artillery is drawn together. Cabinets are busied in contriving schemes of blood and devastation. Thousands will perish. ... Well Mr. Poet, and how then? You

have composed certain verses which you are desirous to see in print, because the impression seems to be delayed, you are displeased, not to say dispirited. Be ashamed of yourself. You live in a world in which your feelings may find worthier subjects. Be concerned for the havoc of nations, and mourn over your retarded volume, when you find a dearth of more important tragedies (*Letters*, II, 336-7).

A still more powerful such realization occurs in Cowper's response to news which reached England in December 1780, several months after the 'late terrible Catastrophe in the Islands' (otherwise known as the great West Indian hurricane). His meditations on the disaster might resonate particularly today, as anxieties about politics and economics are rendered irrelevant by climatic apocalypse:

... these irregular and prodigious Vagaries seem to bespeak a Decay, and forbode perhaps not a very distant Dissolution. This thought has so run away with my Attention that I have left myself no room for the little Politics that have only Great Britain for their Object. Who knows but that while a thousand and ten thousand Tongues are employ'd in adjusting the Scale of our national Concerns, in complaining of new Taxes & Funds loaded with a Debt of accumulating Millions, the Consummation of all things may discharge it in a Moment, and the Scene of all this Bustle disappear as if it had never been?⁴⁷

Being Cowper, however, in other moods he can be highly invested in 'all this Bustle', often with facetious self-interest. He writes to Joseph Hill in October 1779 that 'The News Paper informs me of the Arrival of the Jamaica Fleet. I hope it imports some Pine Apple Plants for me', and confides his hopes in a letter to Lady Hesketh that his old schoolfriend Lord Thurlow will continue in office as Chancellor, so that something 'can be squeezed out of the Wooll-sack in the shape of emolument for me'.⁴⁸ The papers provide him with useful literary information, via advertisements, letters, and gossip; for instance, he discovers with pleasure in 'the public prints' in February 1788 that Hannah More is about to publish a poem on 'Slavery', so he feels no pressure to write any more anti-slavery poems himself;⁴⁹ and in February 1792 an unidentified newspaper reported that both Cowper and Hayley were working on biographies of Milton; as Cowper puts, it 'we seem'd to be match'd like two racehorses against each other'.⁵⁰ In fact, Cowper was working on translating Milton's Latin poems, but the fake news had the happy

effect of prompting Hayley to write to Cowper and initiate a long and productive friendship. The various volumes of his own works are both advertised and reviewed in the papers, which also carry readers' fan letters or critical remarks.⁵¹ Several of his letters reveal that he is anxiously scanning the papers for advertisements of the imminent publication of his own works, and he often thanks his correspondents for sending along clippings of reviews.⁵²

Lady Hesketh frequently sent him cuttings and entire papers if she thought he'd find them interesting, and especially if they were from papers he was unlikely otherwise to see.⁵³ In February 1790, she sent him a copy of *The World*, one of the so-called 'West-End Sheets' disparaged for their 'ridiculous' coverage of the *beau monde*.⁵⁴ She must have selected this issue of *The World* (17 February 1790) – which remains in the Museum's archive, one of the few contemporary newspapers to do so – because it carried a prominent and highly scandalous story about Cowper's relative, the notorious Earl Cowper.⁵⁵ She must also have sent a copy of the promised follow-up issue, since in a letter to her dated 26 February Cowper declares 'Should the wretch be detected who has aspersed Lord Cowper in this second instance, and should I learn his name, *Birth, parentage* and *education*, I may perhaps find an opportunity to pay him in *my* way. Should that happen, he shall not complain that he is overlook'd'.⁵⁶ This is a startling passage, suggesting that Cowper was not above aspersing others in print if they seemed to deserve it.

Despite his occasional indignation at snippets of fake news peddled by the more disreputable newspapers, Cowper seems, like most readers of his day, to have accepted the basic truthfulness of the papers while allowing for errors due to poorly gathered information or inevitable timelags in the conveying of facts. He has a general sense that certain papers are more ministerially managed than others, and seems to understand what later historians have confirmed about Pitt's deft manipulation of the press; he writes to Lady Hesketh on 7 May 1793, thanking her for 'the cuttings of news paper, which because they came from thee I read. Otherwise I never read an article for or against the minister, sensible that both the praise and the blame are bought and paid for, and at a price far greater than they are worth'.⁵⁷ Modern scholarship suggests that, aside from this kind of party-political manipulation, the economics of the newspaper trade in Cowper's day meant that editors relied heavily upon sales and advertising revenue, and hence on satisfying their readers by offering generally reliable information; they were 'far less subservient to politicians than has been assumed'.⁵⁸ The daily interchange between Parliament and press was

surely another factor in the general reliability of political information, as Cowper himself explains in a letter to Newton in February 1784:

I will not apologize for my Politics or suspect them of error, merely because they are taken up from the newspapers. I take it for granted that those Reporters of the Wisdom of our Representatives, are tolerably correct and faithfull. Were they not, and were they guilty of frequent and gross misrepresentation, assuredly, they would be chastized by the rod of parliamentary Criticism. [...] He that reads what passes there, has opportunities of information inferior only to theirs who hear for themselves and can be present upon the spot. Thus qualified I take courage, and when a certain Reverend neighbor of ours curls his nose at me, and holds my opinions cheap merely because he has passed through London in his way to Wiltshire, I am not altogether convinced that he has reason on his side.⁵⁹

This confidence in the truth of the papers co-exists, however, in Cowper's worldview with the tendency very much to 'curl his nose' at those without access to London information via private sources. Time and again he writes to London correspondents for their version of events, and clearly enjoys this sense of access to privileged information, for instance informing Newton in March 1780 that 'I am sorry to learn, not from the Newspaper, but by a Letter from a very intelligent Person in London [Hill], that arbitrary power is the aim of the Court, and Rebellion upon the point of breaking out against it' (he is also here poking fun at Hill's anti-Court politics).⁶⁰ At many points in the letters he asks London-based friends for their versions of parliamentary debates, for London gossip or opinions on Pitt, for fresh information on the Revolutionary War, the Gordon Riots, or abolitionist legislation.⁶¹ Many letters pose questions such as 'but is it true?' or 'Can you give us any news of ...?'⁶² He thanks Unwin in 1778 for his 'Political Intelligence' and for providing 'such Information as cannot be learn'd from the Newspaper'.⁶³ Assuming Unwin has attended the trial of Lord Gordon in February 1781, 'because you was in town so lately', he badgers him for information – 'Tell us all that pass'd' – even though the evening newspaper will bring a full report.⁶⁴ In January 1784 he writes to Hill that 'I wish you had more leisure that you might oftener favor me with a page of Politics. The Authority of a newspaper is not of sufficient weight to determine my opinions, and I have no other documents to be set down by. ... But *your* Politics have weight with me, because I know

your independent Spirit, the justness of your reasonings, and the opportunities you have of information'.⁶⁵

Living as she did in the heart of the West End, Grosvenor Square, Lady Hesketh was a major source of high society gossip and 'political Intelligence';⁶⁶ in February 1789, Cowper thanks her for 'all your politics and anecdotes of political persons', and reassures her, half-jokingly, 'that all the treason and treasonable matter with which you shall entrust me, shall be committed to the flames'.⁶⁷ He appeals sometimes to her and sometimes to other friends and relations in London for corroboration or denial of newspaper reports about the misfortunes or deaths of his acquaintance. In January 1772, he is troubled by reports in the *General Evening Post* that his uncle, Ashley C——r, is missing and reported to have fled to the Continent; in fact, the missing person turns out to be his younger cousin, but in any case Cowper complains to Hill that 'It would have been kind in some of my many Relations, if they had not left me to learn such melancholy Intelligence from the Public Prints'.⁶⁸

The extent of Cowper's engagement with the news is not only an essential component of his personal and poetic sensibility; it also makes him an invaluable historical case study, and prompts many questions (beyond the scope of this essay to answer) about how typical a reader he was. The late eighteenth century is often identified by historians as the beginning of mass media coverage as we know it – an era in which the distribution of generally credible information on a large scale began to create a homogeneous reading public amongst the middling sort.⁶⁹ As early as August 1780, several papers carried a letter claiming that newspapers gave 'our Country Villagers, the Curate, the Exciseman, and the Blacksmith ... the Self-satisfaction of being as wise as our first Minister of State'.⁷⁰

We find a close echo of this sentiment (again, Cowper seems to be riffing upon ideas he's gleaned from the newspapers themselves) in a letter Cowper writes Newton in November 1781: 'for aught I can see, you and we by our respective firesides ... can make as probable conjectures, and look forward into futurity with as clear a sight, as the greatest man in the Cabinet'.⁷¹ But this cheery view of the newspapers as purveyors of wisdom to every corner of the kingdom needs to be complicated by a renewed appreciation of ways in which readers such as Cowper took their news with a substantial pinch of salt and often felt moved to query it, especially if they had access to other sources. Writing to Hill in March 1778, for instance, Cowper observes that 'The last Paper made mention of the Death of Sir Thomas Hesketh', but protests that 'I cannot upon

Occasion of so interesting an Event be contented to receive no other Account than what that uncertain Vehicle convey'd to me'.⁷² Cowper's busy social network in and near to London, derived from his impressive family and school connections, gave him access to many sources of alternative facts, which often compete with the newspapers in a physical race to reach Buckinghamshire first via the shared infrastructure of the Post Office – more than once in his letters, Cowper remarks on how news he reads in a letter from London contradicts what he reads in the paper that arrives in the same delivery.⁷³ Several other letters suggest that information gleaned from 'somebody late from London'⁷⁴, or conversations in Olney High Street, or with the town barber (from whom – 'via tonsoris' – he hears of Gordon's acquittal in 1781),⁷⁵ was as reliable as anything the newspapers conveyed. In a 1783 letter to Newton, Cowper refers facetiously to 'the Quid nuncs of Olney', 'the best Intelligence at Olney—the Barber, the Schoolmaster, and the Drummer of a corps quarter'd at this place' whose 'scene of consultation' is 'a Blacksmith's shed'.⁷⁶ Perhaps our own world of competing news sources, social media and non-stop electronic conversation is a twenty-first-century version of the conversational and epistolary cultures of Cowper's day; his era and our own might be seen as bookends to the more homogeneous nature of news during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Clifford Siskin and William Warner's important manifesto and edited collection of essays, *This is Enlightenment* (2010), defines Enlightenment as 'an event in the history of mediation', and one might expect their project to illuminate the nature and role of 18th-century newspapers.⁷⁷ The rise of the newspaper in Cowper's day absolutely reflects the four interconnected changes which Siskin and Warner identify as enabling factors in Enlightenment: improvements in infrastructure (the mail service, roads, gathering places); the emergence of new genres and formats; new associational practices (coffee and tea gatherings but also epistolary communities capable of daily interchange); and new protocols, especially the 'postal principle' whereby 'groups and individuals can communicate regularly and securely by manuscript, letter, and printed matter'.⁷⁸ So far, so good. And yet the vision of *This is Enlightenment* – especially the essay by Ann Blair and Peter Stallybrass, 'Mediating Information, 1450-1800', and Siskin's own emphasis on Enlightenment as systemization – doesn't quite work for newspapers, as Cowper's complex relationship with news illustrates.⁷⁹ Newspapers in fact figure hardly at all in *This is Enlightenment*; Siskin's master narrative of information gathering, stockpiling, filing and indexing doesn't really accommodate the daily mess of the newspaper – the higgledy-piggledy

organization of the pages as well as the clutter of old copies on the parlour floor which presumably at some point end up in the fire. The fact that the newspapers are often wrong is another aspect of their somewhat dubious contribution to Enlightenment, as is the indiscriminate pirating of information (whether true or false) between papers thanks to largely anonymous authorship and cheerful disregard for copyright. Their transience is also problematic – by definition, the daily newspaper is outdated almost as soon as it's been read ('A Newspaper dies with the day, and its contents in general die with it. Not so the Gentlemans Magazine', Cowper writes in 1788).⁸⁰ Monthly publications such as the *Gentleman's* or the *Monthly Review* would be collected, bound, and kept in libraries. In many ways, the newspapers, and the ways in which they were read, point us towards a more chaotic kind of British Enlightenment, where authority is profoundly unstable.

Another way of looking at the newspapers, especially in the decades in which Cowper is reading them most avidly, the 1780s and 1790s (by 1780, 14 million newspapers were printed annually in England),⁸¹ is to see their proliferation as reaching the point which Siskin and Warner describe as 'saturation': 'On the one hand, saturation means that more people have more access to the technology; on the other, it indicates that, strangely enough, direct access is not required—that even those lacking or refusing access are transformed by the ubiquitous presence of the technology'.⁸² Cowper and his contemporaries clearly suffered from information saturation, in ways that we can well understand today, when for many of us the overwhelming ubiquity of information breeds weary scepticism even while we seem pathologically unable to ignore the news. As Siskin and Warner observe, 'This is the tale now being retold by the early twenty-first-century advent of electronic and digital media. Whether individuals have the technology or try to avoid it, everyone now has the sense that there is nowhere to hide from its mediating powers; in fact, the desire to hide is itself an index to saturation and confirmation of difference becoming a new norm'.⁸³ These ideas may help us to understand in new ways why Cowper's engagement with the newspapers is so compelling today. His investment in news was profound, pervasive, and multi-faceted; it influenced much of his poetry, informed his letters and relationships, and shaped his complex sense of himself in the world.

Notes

- ¹ All quotations from Cowper's poems are from John D. Baird and Charles Ryskamp, eds, *The Poems of William Cowper*, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980-95); hereafter cited as *Poems*.
- ² *St James's Chronicle*, No. 3020 (20-22 July 1780). Quoted in Kevin Williams, *Read All About It! A History of the British Newspaper* (London & New York, Routledge, 2010), 57.
- ³ Mary Favret, *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); 'The Winter Evening' is a touchstone throughout Favret's study.
- ⁴ *The Task*, Book II, 'The Timepiece', 606.
- ⁵ See Cowper's letter to Thornton of 21 May 1782, and the editorial footnote describing Thornton's original letter to Franklin of 6 April 1782, in James King and Charles Ryskamp, eds, *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979-86), II, 47-8 (hereafter cited as *Letters*).
- ⁶ Letter to Unwin, 27 May 1782 (*Letters*, II, 51).
- ⁷ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 5 October 1787 (*Letters*, III, 39).
- ⁸ Letter to Samuel Rose, 2 January 1794 (*Letters*, IV, 443).
- ⁹ Letter to Joseph Hill, 16 March 1780 (*Letters*, I, 323).
- ¹⁰ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 4 December 1786 (*Letters*, II, 607).
- ¹¹ Letter to Newton, c. 24 February 1782 (*Letters*, II, 27). An early letter to Joseph Hill, 3 July 1765 (from Huntingdon, where Cowper was recovering from his breakdown) reports that his woollen draper – his only visitor – 'has undertaken too to get me the St. James's Chronicle 3 times a Week' (*Letters*, I, 98).
- ¹² Letter to Newton, 16 August 1781 (*Letters*, I, 509).
- ¹³ Letter to Newton, 20 April 1786 (*Letters*, II, 127).
- ¹⁴ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 17 April 1786 (*Letters*, II, 520); letter to William Hayley, 6 April 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 52).
- ¹⁵ Letter to Hayley, 10 March 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 26).
- ¹⁶ On the press in Cowper's day, see Hannah Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion in Late Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Jeremy Black, 'Flying a Kite: The Political Impact of the Eighteenth-Century British Press', *Journal of Newspaper and Periodical History* 1 (1984), 12-19; Jeremy Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Croom Helm, 1987).
- ¹⁷ Quoted in Williams, *Read All About It!*, 63.
- ¹⁸ Letter to Unwin, 7 March 1782 (*Letters*, II, 33).
- ¹⁹ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 3 June 1788 (*Letters*, III, 170).

²⁰ *St James's Chronicle*, No. 3020 (20-22 July 1780); the letter also appeared in provincial papers, and is quoted in Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century*, 25.

²¹ See, for instance, *Adam's Weekly Courant* (Chester), No. 2466 (21 March 1780), where a 'William Cowper' is one of several Chester residents who sign their name to a letter declaring their intent to act as vigilantes in a spate of local horse-thieving.

²² Letters to Lady Hesketh, 12 October 1785 (*Letters*, II, 383) and 16 January 1786 (*Letters*, II, 456). The editors of Cowper's *Poems* note how difficult it is to determine whether occasional publications in newspapers and in the *Gentleman's Magazine* were first printings or reprints, and whether they were authorized by Cowper himself or sent by admiring friends as a form of compliment (*Poems*, I, xxxvii-xxxviii).

²³ 'Sonnet. Addressed to Henry Cowper Esqr. On his Emphatical and Interesting Delivery of the Defence of Warren Hastings Esq. in the House of Lords' (*Poems*, III, 12-13 and notes 282-3); and 'Cum Ratione Insanire' (*Poems* III, 10-11 and notes 280-82). Similar revision processes characterize 'To Warren Hastings' (see *Poems* III, 183 and notes 334-5) and 'On the Queen's Nocturnal Visit to London, March 17, 1789' (see *Poems* III, 36-9 and notes 295-7).

²⁴ See *Poems*, I, xxxv.

²⁵ Letter to Samuel Rose, 30 November 1788 (*Letters*, III, 234).

²⁶ See *Poems*, III, 34-5 and 294-5.

²⁷ See *Poems*, III, 36-9 and 295-7.

²⁸ See *Poems* III, 195-9, where Cowper's own published note to the poem (199) explains that 'This tale is founded on an article of intelligence which the Author found in the Buckinghamshire herald for Saturday June 1. 1793' and then quotes the relevant paragraph from the newspaper. The news item has been clipped and pasted onto page 4 of the manuscript preserved in the Osborn Collection, Yale University Library (see the editorial notes in *Poems*, III, 344-5).

²⁹ Letter to Frederick Smith, 20 March 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 34); letter to 'The Northampton Mercury', 16 April 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 58-60).

³⁰ See *Poems*, III, 333.

³¹ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 5 May 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 71-2).

³² See *Poems*, III, 334.

³³ *Public Advertizer*, No. 16291, 16 May 1786; see *Letters*, II, 544, note 2.

³⁴ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 15 May 1786 (*Letters*, II, 540-4).

³⁵ Letter to Hill, 23 November 1783 (*Letters*, II, 183).

³⁶ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 12 May 1788 (*Letters*, III, 161) – 'No creature knows this but yourself'.

³⁷ In a letter to Newton, 18 March 1792, he complains of the dissolute behavior of 'the Prince' (*Letters*, IV, 30-1).

³⁸ Letter to Hill, 15 July 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 149). Cowper tells Hill in December 1789 that 'By means of my neighbor Mr. Throckmorton, I have opportunity to see a French Newspaper which he receives regularly from Paris' (*Letters*, III, 324), and he followed French developments through the London papers also. Of the failed flight to Varennes, he writes to Lady Hesketh on 11 July 1791 that 'no Royal distresses have ever moved me so much' (*Letters*, III, 543).

³⁹ Letter to Newton, 5 March 1781 (*Letters*, I, 455).

⁴⁰ Letter to Newton, April 1783 (*Letters*, II, 126).

⁴¹ He comments in a letter to Joseph Hill 25 October 1765 on the ‘High Winds and continual Rains’ which must have disrupted Hill’s visit to Southampton (*Letters*, I, 121).

⁴² Letter to Unwin, 15 January 1785 (*Letters*, II, 318), thanking him for sending Lunardi’s book. In a letter to Unwin, 29 September 1783, Cowper had also marvelled at accounts in ‘the public Prints’ of the possibilities of balloon travel (*Letters*, II, 165-6).

⁴³ To Newton, 20 February 1792: ‘We mourn for the mismanagement at Botany bay, and foresee the issue. ... The African Colonization and the manner of conducting it has long been matter to us of pleasing speculation’ (*Letters*, IV, 17).

⁴⁴ He writes to Newton on 27 November 1784 (*Letters*, II, 300-1) describing with obvious distress a recent letter to the *General Evening Post* relating a young University student’s decline into alcoholism, venereal disease and death, which seems to have been part of the inspiration for Cowper’s diatribe against schools in *Tirocinium*.

⁴⁵ Letter to Hill, 10 December 1776 (*Letters*, I, 266), noting that ‘Dr. Madan’s Preferment was in the Paper’; letter to Hill, 6 June 1778 (*Letters*, I, 282), observing that ‘Thurlow’s Advancement to the Seals I imagine, surprises Nobody’; letter to Hill, 4 December 1784 (*Letters*, II, 307), on the King’s refusal of Thurlow’s request on Johnson’s behalf – ‘An article which I saw in the paper lately, gave me both pleasure and pain. I was hurt for the King, while the Chancellor’s conduct pleased me’.

⁴⁶ Letter to Colman, 27 December 1785 (*Letters*, II, 436). Early the next year, he reads of Colman’s appearance at Bath, ‘in high Spirits’ (Letter to Lady Hesketh, 10 January 1786, *Letters*, II, 448).

⁴⁷ Letter to Hill, 15 February 1781 (*Letters*, I, 443-4).

⁴⁸ Letter to Hill, 2 October 1779 (*Letters*, I, 305); Letter to Lady Hesketh, 26 May 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 83).

⁴⁹ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 16 February 1788 (*Letters*, III, 103-4).

⁵⁰ Letter to Hayley, 17 March 1792 (*Letters*, IV, 28-9).

⁵¹ See for instance Letter to Hill, 9 May 1781 (*Letters*, I, 470), where he writes with satisfaction that ‘I am in the press’, thanks to the rapid ‘Conveyance of Intelligence’ across London via both personal contacts and ‘the public prints’).

⁵² Writing to Newton, 25 June 1785 (*Letters*, II, 358), he notes that he has ‘never seen the book advertised’ and hence concludes that Johnson is still behindhand with printing. ‘Proposals’ soliciting subscribers for the 1786 volume were likewise advertised in many of the London papers (see letter to Unwin, 28 November 1785, *Letters*, II, 405, note 2). In May 1786, Cowper heard both from ‘my friend Bull’ and Lady Hesketh of a hostile ‘Critique’ of his Homer in the *Public Advertiser* (Letter to Lady Hesketh, 8 May 1786, *Letters*, II, 535).

⁵³ On 1 January 1788, Cowper writes to thank Lady Hesketh for sending a clipping of an amusing poem by Robert Merry, which the editors of the *Letters* identify as from *The World* (*Letters*, III, 78).

⁵⁴ See Black, *The English Press in the Eighteenth Century*, 40. *The World and Fashionable Advertiser* began publication on 1 January 1787 by John Bell, who had previously owned the *Morning Post*, a pro-Pitt paper which had become increasingly scandal-orientated in the preceding years.

⁵⁵ I am grateful to Kate Bostock for unearthing this copy of *The World*, number 977 (17 February 1790) in the Museum's inner sanctum. The story about Earl Cowper, on the second page of the issue, seems part of a series entitled 'Biography of the World,' and promises a continuation.

⁵⁶ This chance discovery of the offending item in *The World* illuminates the otherwise mysterious threat Cowper here makes, which is noted as a puzzle by King and Ryskamp (*Letters*, III, 348, note 3).

⁵⁷ To Lady Hesketh, 7 May 1793 (*Letters*, IV, 332). Kevin Williams describes Pitt's use of 'intimidation, Secret Service subsidies, the withholding of official news and advertisements as well as threat of "trouble at the Stamp Office" to manipulate the newspapers' (Williams, *Read All About It!*, 66).

⁵⁸ Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion*, 4; 72.

⁵⁹ Letter to Newton, 22 February 1784 (*Letters*, II, 214-15). Hannah Barker notes that London readers, including Members of Parliament themselves, would write in to the newspapers to correct inaccurate reporting of Parliamentary debates (*Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion*, 13-14).

⁶⁰ Letter to Newton, 18 March 1780 (*Letters*, I, 325).

⁶¹ In June 1784, Cowper reports to Newton that Mr Wright (Lord Dartmouth's steward and a frequent visitor to Olney) 'represents [Pitt] as a niggard and a drinker', unsettling his previous inclination to revere Pitt, who 'has been so frequently extolled in the papers for standing aloof from all the dissolute manners of the age' (Letter to Newton, 21 June 1784, *Letters*, II, 256); a couple of weeks later, he complains to Unwin about recent detailed reports of Pitt's unseemly levity during a debate over taxation – 'a graver countenance upon the occasion would have been more decent' (Letter to Unwin, 3 July 1784, *Letters*, II, 257). Writing to Newton on 25 June 1785, he notes that 'I feel myself a little angry with a Minister who when he imposed a Tax upon gloves was not ashamed to call them a Luxury' (*Letters*, II, 359).

⁶² The Gordon Riots, which raged around Newton's house, caused Cowper particular anxiety, and he makes several requests for refutation of 'false' reports in letters of June 1780 to Newton and Unwin (*Letters*, I, 351-6).

⁶³ To Unwin, 18 July 1778 (*Letters*, I, 285). See also letter to Hill, 22 January 1785, where he poses many questions about how the upcoming session of Parliament will 'employ themselves' (*Letters*, I, 321-2).

⁶⁴ Letter to Unwin, 6 February 1781 (*Letters*, I, 441).

⁶⁵ Letter to Hill, 8 January 1784 (*Letters*, II, 198). See also letter to Hill 10 December 1793, asking 'Can you give us any news of Lord How's Armada ...?' (*Letters*, IV, 440).

⁶⁶ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 29 September 1787 (*Letters*, III, 34).

⁶⁷ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 31 January 1789 (*Letters*, III, 256).

⁶⁸ Letter to Hill, 30 January 1772 (*Letters*, I, 247).

⁶⁹ Particularly after the middle of the nineteenth century, newspapers' increasing reliance upon advertising revenue meant that non-mainstream publications were increasingly marginalized (Williams, *Read All About It!*, 94-6).

⁷⁰ Quoted in Barker, *Newspapers, Politics, and Public Opinion*, 117; see also note 20 above.

⁷¹ Letter to Newton, 27 November 1781 (*Letters*, I, 546-7).

⁷² Letter to Hill, 8 March 1778 (*Letters*, I, 277).

⁷³ See, for instance, letter to Newton, 21 December 1781, on conflicting reports via letter and ‘the newspaper’ of Admiral Kempenfelt’s ‘close engagement’ with the French fleet (*Letters*, I, 565).

⁷⁴ Letter to Newton, 4 February 1781 (*Letters*, I, 439).

⁷⁵ Letter to Unwin, 6 February 1781; by the evening of the same day, he has ‘read the trial as related in the General Evening’ (*Letters*, I, 441-2).

⁷⁶ Letter to Newton, 26 January 1783 (*Letters*, II, 100-1).

⁷⁷ Clifford Siskin and William Warner, eds, *This is Enlightenment* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), especially their introduction, ‘This is Enlightenment: An Invitation in the Form of an Argument’ (1-33).

⁷⁸ Siskin and Warner, ‘This is Enlightenment’, 12-15.

⁷⁹ Ann Blair and Peter Stallybrass, ‘Mediating Information, 1450-1800,’ in Siskin and Warner, *This is Enlightenment*, 139-63; Clifford Siskin, ‘Mediated Enlightenment: The System of the World’, in Siskin and Warner, *This is Enlightenment*, 164-72.

⁸⁰ Letter to Lady Hesketh, 19 May 1788 (*Letters*, III, 161-2).

⁸¹ See Jeremy Black, ‘Newspapers and Politics in the 18th Century’, *History Today*, 36:10 (October 1986), 36-42; 36.

⁸² Siskin and Warner, ‘This is Enlightenment’, 19.

⁸³ *Ibid.*