

The Early Commentators:
Examining the Value of Opinion in the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*

Richard Chu

December 2, 1999

In our modern age of information, opinion is as prevalent as the leaves that line the streets after the first autumn wind. For a given piece of information, there are numerous opinions given about it, from the simple to the Tolstoy-esque. This brings to question what is of most importance, the information or the opinion? Can a piece of information, be it about an event, a circumstance, an object, or a person, survive without some subjective commentary? By examining the development of the newspaper with an examination of *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, one will discover the history of editorial commentary in England and appreciate the value of opinion as a guide for readers to understanding the circumstances, events, things, and people of an age.

Contrary to what may be popular belief, news reporting did not begin as an objective endeavour. From the earliest days of written communication, information was subject to the views of the writer, be it hand-written or typed. This was understandable even by the sixteenth century as “few [aristocratic] Englishmen, other than ecclesiastics, could read and write, [so] the need for either type was limited” (Hart 1). Given the relatively illiterate population, “neither the writer or the reader differentiated between news and comment...In fact, they were so interrelated that the opinion element—the moralizing and the propagandizing of interest groups—cannot be disentangled entirely from the news report” (2). The reason for this came mainly because the earliest forms of news sharing were in the form of “letters from friends and from hired agents, known as ‘intelligencers’” (2). For the non-aristocratic classes “in the early sixteenth century, handwritten ballads gave news in verse. But often they contained more comment on than report of an event” (5).

Even the government of the day would use the printed media as a means to their own ends. On the one hand, by attempting to censor what could be printed with the Licensing Act of 1662, the government was directing printers to publish news and opinion that supported the established authority, both political and religious. In the early seventeenth century, “there was little licensed printing that was not religious or governmental in nature. Sometimes the sole purpose of a royal proclamation was to sway public opinion” (Hart 7). Pamphlets served this end as

respectable and sober-minded Englishmen read the longer pamphlets and newsbooks. They learned of official transactions, rebellions, trails for treason and heresy. In long digressive editorializing sentences and pious statements, they

were warned against blind obstinacy and against blasphemous, idolatrous, and superstitious beliefs (11).

These pamphlets authorized by the government “printed opinions...[that] would best serve the interest of the nation’s power structure” (8).

The government still saw the value of print media even after the end of the Licensing Act and the failure of subsequent attempts at creating a reformed version of it. As Jeremy Black argues, “the failure of these successive measures [to revive the Licensing Act] may have owed something to a conviction among some parliamentarians that the press was beneficial” (10). Arguably this is so because opinion and fact were so intermingled, as “almost any event could be and was interpreted in the approved morality of that period” (Hart 11). These methods and concerns established a long legacy for future print publications.

One of the results of the media having a history of heavy religious or political tones is the desire for writers to use the medium to elucidate and reform. Many writers, particularly Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, used the print media for such a purpose, as “instruction took many forms ranging from the literature of social manners, that drew heavily on periodicals such as the *Spectator*, to didactic religious material” (Black 246). Both the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* served

as guides, leading readers through the vast array of moral, cultural, consumer, and social choices that accompanied their relationships with one another and themselves, with the financial and commercial markets of their day, and with contemporary entertainments and pastimes. Mediating between the day-to-day social and material lives of their readers and the more universal and permanent values of good sense, honesty, modesty, decorum, and good taste, the papers attempt to secure a fixed significance for the everyday (Mackie 3).

Both Addison and Steele managed to fulfil this goal by “not waving the harsh rod of zealous self-righteousness, but by speaking in the congenial tones of conversation...rely[ing] on the subtler powers of participation and persuasion” (4, 5).

This is made apparent in the first issues of the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*. Steele states in his “Dedication to Mr. Maynwaring” in the *Tatler*,

The general Purpose of this Paper, is to expose the false Arts of Life, to pull off the Disguises of Cunning, Vanity and Affectation, and to recommend a general Simplicity in our Dress, our Discourse, and our Behaviour. No Man has a better Judgement for the Discovery, or a nobler Spirit for the Contempt of all Imposture, than your self; which Qualities render you the most proper Patron for the Author of these Essays” (Steele 47-49).

In this passage, Steele suggests that the individual is able to “reform the sensibilities—esthetic, sartorial, social, and sexual... so that he or she, guided by the principles of good sense, decorum, and benevolence, would then do, say, like and buy the right thing” (Mackie 2).

Addison expresses a similar purpose, but in a narrative form in the first issue of the *Spectator*. Instead of stating his goals explicitly as Steele does, he expresses his purpose through a biographical introduction of Mr. Spectator,

Thus I live in the World, rather as a Spectator of Mankind, than as one of the Species; by which means I have made my self a Speculative Statesman, Soldier, Merchant and Artizan, without ever meddling with any Practical Part in Life...In short, I have acted in all the parts of my Life as a Looker-on, which is the Character I intend to preserve in this Paper” (Addison 81).

Addison and Steele use “a series of self-contained, thematically unified essays” (Mackie 2), attempting to “not simply to modify the behaviour of their audience, but to change their very minds, [having] these moral reforms be *internalized* by readers” (5).

Both the *Tatler* and the *Spectator* manage to maintain a close relationship with its readers by utilizing a strongly conversational tone. Both publications use the first person in addressing the readers, and thus avoid sounding overly moralistic or authoritative. Just as a columnist would do today, both Addison and Steele give the impression that they are expressing their own opinion, and not forcing the reader to accept it. Rather, “they amiably, if sometimes ironically, engage that audience as equals in the discussion” (Mackie 5).

This dialogue with the reader is apparent in many issues of the *Spectator*, such as in No. 82, where Steele discusses the topic of being in debt. As if telling an anecdote to a friend, Steele begins his essay with a story, “Passing under Ludgate the other Day I heard a Voice bawling for Charity, which I thought I had somewhere heard before...” (206). From his story he begins his commentary, “reflecting upon the strange Constitution of some Men, and how meanly then behave themselves in all Sorts of Conditions” (207). By starting his essay with a story, Steele is able to comment without fear of offense from the reader, since everything he says is framed around the circumstances of the character he is describing in the story. It’s within this framework that Steele is able to say,

I cannot much wonder at the Endeavor after Gain; but am extremely astonished that Men can be so insensible of the Danger of running into Debt...One would think he did not know that his Creditor can say the worst thing imaginable of him, to wit, *That he is unjust*, without Defamation, and can sieze his Person without being guilty of an Assault. Yet such is the loose and abandoned Turn of some Mens Minds, that they can live under these constant Apprehensions, and still go on to encrease the Cause of them (208).

Steele ends the essay with a speech of a particular character that embodies the vices he describes associated with being in debt, thus re-emphasizing the perception that the essay is not directed specifically at the reader. This is reinforced by the satirical, if not comic description of the character Steele describes as having “a whorish unresisting good Nature, which makes him incapable of having a Property in any thing. His Fortune, his Reputation, his Time, and his Capacity, are at any Man’s Service that comes first” (209). By using such a character, Steele manages to end in a lighthearted manner, allowing his essay to become memorable to the reader.

Humor was a characteristic often found in instructional publications. This is apparent in the *Tatler*, even within the name of the publication itself, “the title and its self-mocking, ironical tone signal a set of closely related statements about itself and its strategies” (Mackie 27). By setting a tone that is “entertaining, [and thus] a playful contribution to that ongoing urban conversation,” Steele “draws attention away from the seriousness of the *Tatler*’s purpose. The paper and its persona thus eschew any overly authoritarian role and establish a relationship of compassionate camaraderie with the audience” (27).

The *Tatler*’s humour is apparent in No. 224, where Addison utilizes a sarcastic tone as he comments on newspaper advertisements. This is apparent from the first sentence, where he states, “It is my Custom, in a Dearth of News, to *entertain* my self with those Collections of Advertisements that appear” (Addison 70, my emphasis). Addison exhibits a humorous attitude when he says he as “frequently been caught with Tears in my Eyes over a melancholy Advertisement,” laughing at the content of the advertisements coincidentally placed (70).

It is important to note that advertisements at the time served more than a commercial purpose as advertisements do today. Rather, an advertisement included anything that was paid to be inserted in to the paper, “newspapers frequently stated that they could not accept items from contributors, often essays or letters, unless they were paid for as advertisements” (Black 27). With this in mind, Addison’s commentary on advertisements made more sense when he suggests advertisements as “Accounts of News from the little World” (Addison 71).

Addison explains himself by categorizing the reasons for his reaction to advertisements. He first mentions the most “ridiculous” as “instruments of Ambition,” whereby “a Man that is by no Means big enough for the Gazette, may easily creep into the Advertisements; by which Means we often see...a Running-Footman with an Ambassador” (70). Here he is commenting on the fact that news bits of differing importance or significance are put together, thus diminishing the value of both. He goes on to mention and comment on the fact that advertisements have served as “Management of Controversy, insomuch that above half the Advertisements one meets with now-a-Days are purely Polemical” (71). Addison finds it ridiculous that within the advertisement page are arguments that seem to never end. He also comments on the fact that advertisements are filled with promotions for “almost every Thing that is necessary for Life...If a Man would recover a Wife, or a Horse that is stolen or strayed; if he wants new Sermons, Electuaries, Asses Milk, or any Thing else, either for his Body or his Mind, this is the Place to look for them” (71).

Both Addison and Steele reveal, through the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, the value of opinion and commentary on aspects of everyday life. Implicit to their essays is the realization that fact alone provides little value to one’s own life. This is explicitly apparent, for example, in Addison’s essay on advertisements. What Addison and Steele attempt to provide is a context with which readers can absorb and utilize the latest information so as to best serve the individual and society. At a time when newspapers began to flourish, and the mass distribution of information increased, there grew the need for writers to help guide readers, preventing them from blindly becoming engulfed in the latest fashions of the day. Their work would serve as the model for future generations of writers, up to and including the present day where commentary and opinion programs are commonplace, offered in every form of media.

Works Cited

- Addison, Joseph. The Spectator, No.1. 1 March 1711. The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from the Tatler and the Spectator. Ed. Erin Mackie. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1998. 79-82.
- Addison, Joseph. The Tatler, No.224. 14 September 1710. The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from the Tatler and the Spectator. Ed. Erin Mackie. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1998. 70-73.
- Black, Jeremy. The English Press in the Eighteenth Century. Beckenham, Kent: Croom Helm, 1987.
- Hart, Jim Allee. Views on the News: The Developing Editorial Syndrome 1500-1800. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1970.

Mackie, Erin, ed. The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from the Tatler and the Spectator. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998.

Steele, Richard. "Dedication to Mr. Maynwaring." The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from the Tatler and the Spectator. Ed. Erin Mackie. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998. 47-49.

Steele, Richard The Spectator, No. 82. 4 June 1711. The Commerce of Everyday Life: Selections from the Tatler and the Spectator. Ed. Erin Mackie. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1998. 206-209.