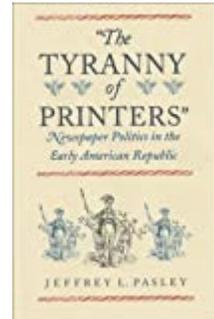




**Jeffrey L. Pasley.** *"The Tyranny of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic.* Jeffersonian America Series. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001. xviii + 517 pp. \$37.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8139-2030-6.



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## Young Turks and the Politics of Early American Newspapers

Young Turks and the Politics of Early American Newspapers

Jeffrey Pasley's *"The Tyranny of Printers"* tells a new story about the partisanship of the 1790s and the rise of political parties. Anchoring his political history in the history of journalism, Pasley locates newspapers at the heart of early American politics, specifically with the emergence of the Republicans as an opposition voice during John Adams's administration. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison initially used the press as a means of disseminating the Republicans' political positions. They were followed by a group of men—whom Pasley portrays as young turks—who quickly took up the cause and established a thriving Republican newspaper network. Newspaper editors not only articulated and disseminated an alternative to the Federalists in power; they themselves became professional politicians. And, because they often rose to powerful positions without the aid of education or family status, Pasley argues, they helped to democratize the American political system. Through extensive attention to the biographies and career trajectories of printer-editors, Pasley depicts their motives and

personalities within a political universe in which background and status were considered important elements of a man's character.

In one of its most important contributions, *"The Tyranny of Printers"* reexamines old assumptions about the press within the larger scope of political culture. Scholars have long viewed with disdain the intense partisanship of early newspapers—in part, Pasley suggests, because of the current-day ideal of journalistic objectivity and the place of newspapers within our own political system. Scholars have presumed that an overtly partisan editor must necessarily have written at the behest of his party bosses, making this the "dark ages" of a submissive, deferential press. In contrast, Pasley shows that "the newspaper press was the political system's central institution, not simply a forum or atmosphere in which politics took place," and that editors were "purposeful actors in the political process, linking parties, voters, and the government together, and pursuing specific political goals" (p. 3). This valuable insight permits a much more historically sensitive reading of late eighteenth-century print and political culture.

Another significant contribution is the book's attention to the *timing* of Republican opposition in response to specific events of the 1790s. Pasley makes a strong case that repressive legislation passed by the Adams administration prompted an explosion of Republican newspapers throughout the country. Ironically, the Sedition Act of 1798, which sought to contain dissent, seems to have been the most influential. Far from limiting "false, scandalous and malicious" statements against the government or the president, as the Act read, its passage actually spurred, in Pasley's words, "a major expansion that transformed American journalism and created a new, politicized sector of the publishing industry" (p. 153). The chronology is striking. Pasley beautifully illustrates the point with a series of maps that display the founding of Republican newspapers before and after the Act was passed. His maps show that the total number of Republican papers throughout the country more than doubled in the eighteen months after the Sedition Act's passage. The chapters that treat this development are among the strongest in the book.

Though Pasley is less explicit about his intervention in the field of print culture and the public sphere, his attention to the personal machinations among partisan editors and political leaders reveals a new side to the public sphere than that depicted by Juergen Habermas and his followers, most notably Michael Warner in *The Letters of the Republic* (1990). As Warner recognized, the critical new element of print discourse beginning in the 1720s and 1730s was *impersonality*: the notion that readers could discern the validity of a published document without knowing the identity of the author, nor the author's place in the social and economic hierarchy. Readers of newspapers participated in an impersonal public sphere in which a writer's words and arguments, not his identity, were all one needed to consider the piece's worth. Whereas Warner portrayed a world in which political discussion was uttered anonymously or pseudonymously, Pasley depicts a late eighteenth-century print culture in which characters, class backgrounds, political affiliations and personalities mattered intensely. Republican editors attacked Federalist legislators with dogged zeal, using ideological critique as well as personal attack. Federalist editors responded in kind, but they chose to direct their bile at the *editors* rather than Republican leaders. Moreover, Pasley shows, it was the printers' comparatively humble, uneducated, unconnected backgrounds that made their printed opinions suspect. Federalists charged that such men did not have the authority to address the public. Further, they argued that men without

that authority could only be the puppets of Republican leaders who acted behind the scenes, covertly, to effect their goals. Overall, then, Pasley implicitly draws attention to the extent to which print had earlier been dominated by men of letters and standing—and he illustrates the profoundly uncomfortable transition away from that dominance in the years following the Revolution. To be sure, Pasley and Warner analyze very different moments during the eighteenth century, and Warner himself recognized a sea change in print culture following the Revolution. But Pasley's book suggests that we take another look at the earlier part of the century. Warner's public prints may have been impersonal, but it was nevertheless rife with assumptions about the class of men best suited to express their opinions in print.

As these remarks suggest, "*The Tyranny of Printers*" is new political history undergirded by a strong commitment to narrative, and the author paints this picture on a large, richly peopled canvas. Pasley sidesteps the details that have preoccupied conventional political historians—for example, such questions as whether it is accurate to label as "parties" the Republicans and Federalists of the early nineteenth century—in order to make larger points about the links between partisan political culture and the print media. This frees him to discuss questions of interest to scholars across a variety of specializations. Further, his incorporation of biographical data into the narrative ties the book to a growing literature that integrates biography with social and political history. In doing so, Pasley illustrates for his readers the ways in which his subjects imagined their own futures as harnessed to that of the new nation.

But there are risks with an expansive argument, and privileging the narrative weakens other parts of the book. Pasley's insistence that the politicization of Republican printers was a *national* phenomenon, for example, is not fully supported by his evidence, which is heavily weighted toward the urban Northeast. Engaging as it is, his obvious sympathy for the Republicans leads him to oversimplify the distinctions between the parties, describing the Federalists as something akin to bad guys prone to a "reign of terror" (p. 173) against his ambitious, upwardly-mobile Republican printers. Furthermore, Pasley is eager to equate the role of newspaper editor with that of politician, even for partisan editors who did not literally take office. This interpretation does not capture the complex roles of editors of this era—they were, among other things, shapers of rhetorical styles, typographical innovators, and cultural mediators who weighed in on all topics. He misses an opportunity

to contribute a more sustained analysis of the complex role of printer-editor, which included politics but was far more multifaceted.

Pasley's treatment of democratization and class raises more substantive questions. A primary component of his argument is that the printers helped to democratize politics in the early Republic. Most of them rose through the artisanal ranks to become master printers, and a surprising number of them continued on to hold public office, literally becoming politicians themselves (unlike, it is worth noting, their Federalist editor counterparts). As Pasley notes, they "became agents and promoters of a new and less-deferential brand of politics" (p. 20). The significance of their democratizing role, however, is mitigated by questions about the extent to which they left the door open for others to follow. In many ways, this is a story of the winners of the era and it sits in an uneasy tension with standard interpretations of labor history, which traces a rapid decline in opportunities for working men in the early nineteenth century. The celebratory quality of Pasley's narrative leaves unaddressed the printers' conflicts with their journeymen over inadequate wages, conflicts that Pasley mentions only in passing. This suggests that Pasley's interpretation of these men as democratizers overlooks their individual motives to focus instead on far more abstract social shifts toward egalitarianism. Republican printer-editors may not have used their printing

offices to seek wealth matching that of gentlemen of the period, but they did seek political power to match that of powerful gentlemen. "*The Tyranny of Printers*" implies that they continued to conceive of power in familiar, deferential terms established by men of wealth and standing. They understood their rising position to be predicated on, to some extent, the continued obedience and loyalty of their underlings. But as Pasley's ambitious printers learned to change the political rules, their employees matched them. In all major Northeastern cities, journeymen organized, set wages, and sometimes walked out on masters who underpaid them. Thus, without better clarification, "democratization" is a misleading descriptor that places this narrative at odds with much current literature on the period.

If this book seems out of step with labor history, it remains important to the fields of political history and print culture, and it will be useful in graduate courses. It particularly exhibits the historiographical value of drawing new conclusions by juxtaposing two fields of inquiry. Finally, as "*The Tyranny of Printers*" changes our conception of the partisan press during the early Republic, it raises new questions about the rise of "objective" journalism and the far different interrelations of print, politics, and power today. Jeffrey Pasley has captured a moment of possibility for the power of partisan journalism and the career opportunities it offered, at least for some.

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