

Democracy's Fatal Flaw: Anonymity and the Normalization of Offence in John Dunton's Epistolary Periodicals

HELEN BERRY 

Abstract: Epistolary periodicals associated with English coffee house culture have often been associated with Jürgen Habermas' model for the rise of the 'bourgeois public sphere'. Habermas proposed this ultimately gave rise to the free articulation of public opinion and the emergence of democratic values. Written at a time of socio-political upheaval, John Dunton's serial publications relied upon anonymous authorship, particularly his most famous periodical, the *Athenian Mercury* (1691–97), which pioneered the question-and-answer format and gave rise to many imitations. In the present era, we are witnessing democracy imperilled by the proliferation of AI-driven 'fake news'. This paper proposes that the origins of this phenomenon may be found in epistolary periodicals which normalized giving and receiving offence in print. The pernicious quality of anonymous print, free from personal accountability or consequences, embedded from its inception a fatal flaw in the project of constituting a democratic public sphere.

Keywords: anonymous, coffee houses, Dunton, John, eighteenth century, Habermas, Jürgen, media history, print

The remarkable figure of John Dunton (1659–1732), publisher, philanthropist, innovator, and Scriblerian, is often credited with inventing the epistolary periodical.¹ Some scholarly attention has been paid to Dunton's publications, but he remains among the less well-known authors and publishers of printed ephemera in the late-Stuart age.² Dunton is still a fairly marginal historical figure compared with some of his near-contemporaries, Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, and Daniel Defoe.³ The literary merit of his output has certainly been questioned, but in terms of his historical significance, his relative obscurity is unjustified considering his influence in shaping numerous genres which were more fully elaborated in the course of the eighteenth century. In addition to his innovations in experimenting with serialized publications, he made significant contributions to the development of autobiographical genres, including first-person travel narratives which blurred the lines between fact and fiction.⁴ This essay embarks on a fresh interpretation of his significance as the pioneer of anonymized authorship, to which Dunton gave new form and popularity via his question-and-answer periodical, the *Athenian Gazette or Casuistical Mercury* (1691–97).⁵ It proposes that through this and subsequent publications, Dunton normalized the idea that intentionally printing personal insults under the cloak of anonymity was a legitimate strategy for generating controversy, increasing readership, and thereby profiting in terms of literary celebrity (shading into notoriety) and financial gain. The full implications of giving anonymized offence in public media took many decades, indeed centuries, to reach their current apotheosis. Twenty-first century media analysts have concurred that the historic association between anonymity in print and now online has brought with it a number of problems, as one recent commentator has observed:

The extension of anonymity tends to favour anti-social behaviours and information abuses (misinformation, news intoxication, etc.) which are a cause of great concern, not only by its impact on media credibility but also by its harmful effects on [...] public debate.⁶

This essay highlights how the origins of 'licensed' offence in print, via anonymous or pseudonymous authorship, had its mass, commercial origins in the late-seventeenth century. As we shall see, dalliance with anonymity was a risky strategy which entailed playing with private reputations in public, one which not only foregrounded contemporary concerns about the corrosive effect to civil society and the body politic of anonymized abuse in print: it also brought personal tragedy for Dunton himself.

1. *Coffee Houses and the Habermasian Public Sphere: A Re-evaluation*

During the late 1990s when I wrote about Dunton's most long-lived and significant periodical project, the *Athenian Mercury*, I was very much influenced, as were many of my generation, by Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere*, translated into English in 1989 by Thomas Berger. This gave rise to the then-fashionable idea that Restoration epistolarity in its many genres and forms, specifically the literary periodicals circulating in London coffee houses, were among the leading examples of the kinds of print that furthered the development of the archetypal bourgeois public sphere. Following Habermas, historians and literary scholars at the end of the twentieth century often took the view that the 'republic of letters', composed by men and women of the middling sort and disseminated in the press so that opinions, knowledge, political commentary, and debate could circulate freely, fitted neatly into the construction of a public sphere that was founded upon rational and critical debate. Other features according to Habermas of the kind of public sphere typified by eighteenth-century coffee houses in England were that they were open, quasi-democratic, and beyond the realm of official government censorship. During the early 2000s, much effort went into critiquing Habermas's model, which came to be regarded as a foundational text in the rise of Western neoliberalism.⁷ Historians and literary scholars have argued for the mistranslation of Habermas's original concept, not as a singular entity ('the public sphere'), exploring instead a multiplicity of early modern publics as interlocking realms of activity. As Brian Cowan has astutely summarized, 'historians have now reached what we might call a post-Habermasian moment in their understanding of the ways in which publics and their "public spheres" were formed, sociability, and knowledge formation in the making of the modern world.' He goes on to observe that, although the public sphere model has been modified,

we should not assume that Habermas's ideas have been entirely rejected or that his scheme for understanding the emergence of modern civil society has been superseded by other challengers [...] if anything, historians have only become more enamoured with Habermas's terminology and concepts than ever before.⁸

The paradigm Habermas established regarding the emergence of the public sphere, and the central role played by the 'new culture of print', most influentially periodicals and newspapers, is of enduring influence, framing wider discussions of the critical role in developing accountability, democratic culture, and civil society in different global contexts and periods.⁹

In a comparative European perspective, it is widely accepted that the English press had a unique degree of freedom from government censorship following the lapse of the Press Act in 1695.¹⁰ In many respects, this was guided by the constitutional settlement of 1689, which enshrined to a certain degree principles of toleration and legitimate dissent, although these were by no means guaranteed and were unlike the universal human rights which came to be defined in the mid-twentieth century.¹¹ After 1695, the English press was precociously dedicated to freedom of expression on a variety of topics, some overtly controversial and tangentially referencing matters of state and court life. Habermas's model development of the public sphere in England included the emergence of a stock market and financial institutions in the City of London, the engine of free market capitalism, and a balanced constitutional settlement dominated by laissez-faire Whig administrations after 1689. Late-Stuart England was *the* model of Habermasian neo-liberalism. 'Already in the 1670s', Habermas observed, 'the government had found itself compelled to issue proclamations that confronted the dangers bred by the coffee-house discussions. The coffee houses were considered seedbeds of political unrest'.¹² But the suppression of coffee houses soon failed, and in the long-term venues for free discussion among a literate and commercially successful middling sort, politically informed by a free press, contributed to the evolution of democratic political institutions. Habermas never specified *which* coffee houses achieved this level of social interaction or lived up to the model as prescribed (and indeed, that was never properly his project). His idea of the public sphere evoked the *idea* of the coffee house, not the history of *actual* coffee houses. Only a tiny minority, if any, matched the model of what Habermas imagines a coffee house ought to have been.¹³ The generally accepted figure is that there were around five hundred coffee houses in London by 1700, in a population of about half a million people.¹⁴ The coffee house as an institution of free speech and debate, a form of 'commons' for the exchange of ideas, received considerable interest among historians and popular audiences at about the same time as the invention of the modern internet. The parallels seemed obvious, and the rise of new and seemingly uncensored real and virtual spaces then and now seemed to be worth celebrating.¹⁵

This model of the Habermasian public sphere has never been comprehensively challenged by historians and literary scholars writing about the rise of coffee houses and print culture.¹⁶ Parallels clearly existed between coffee house readers hungry for epistolary periodicals in which their voices were given air time, and freely debated, and the 'virtual' world of the internet. As the technology of mass media gained ground, and the idea of a participative 'Web 2.0' (later known as social media) was born, the parallel between coffee house periodicals, the public sphere, and the free-for-all of an unrestrained democratic platform for the articulation of 'people politics' was if anything reinforced through the early 2000s. Landmark works appeared such as Markman Ellis's *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* (2004), which remains one of the best volumes on the subject, and Brian Cowan's *Social Life of Coffee* (2005), a lucid and scholarly analysis primarily concerned with high politics, spy networks, and the *virtuosi*. Coffee house literature offered a charismatic history that spoke to the social, economic, and communications revolution of the early twenty-first century and the inexorable expansion of online technology into all aspects of everyday life.

Since the global economic crisis of 2007, the analytic lenses and assumptions about the hegemonic status of the public sphere in delivering stable democratic systems have shifted seismically, but the historiographical interpretation of the public sphere paradigm established by Habermas has been slow to respond. Successive economic crises since then have been accompanied by a rise of populist politics in the world's largest and longest

established democracies (notably in Britain and Continental Europe, the United States, and India) and fears that the idea of democracy is in peril. Another paradigm shift has been the development of AI technologies, which have disrupted assumptions about the durability of democratic government systems and the ability of electoral politics to cope with a tsunami of 'deepfake' online disinformation.¹⁷ With the benefit of critical distance, and subsequent geopolitical turmoil, Habermas's theory was over-reliant on an abstract idea of virtual public spaces at the expense of actual social networks, to the neglect of more nuanced examinations of the interplay between the materiality of texts and the subjectivities and socio-political circumstances of their authors and readers. Contributions by Thomas O. Beebee and Jaroslaw Jasenowski to the present volume do much to challenge the lure of virtual abstraction over the materiality of text production and interpretation. Beebee's reading of Dunton's *Athenian Mercury* illustrates in comparative European perspective the complex entanglement of coffee house literature with geopolitics, specifically the thrilling and anxiety-promoting prospect of espionage unmasked. Jasenowski is similarly attentive to the interplay between imaginary and material worlds, text and objects, and the complex claims to veracity invoked with reference to the material and thus verifiable 'truth' claims by authors such as Dunton, to whose work we shall return with yet more questions shortly.

As we have recently been reminded, catastrophic and unpredictable events such as war and pandemics rupture and fragment the evolutionary model of a coherent public sphere. Habermas's hypothesis may have been 'good to think with', but it was premised on the teleological assumption that the public sphere was in and of itself a public good, enshrining virtuous democratic principles which were Whiggishly moving *towards* something, that is, the (secure) end goal of enfranchisement and civil, commercial socio-economic conditions. Both the means and the ends, and the uncomplicated, unilinear purity of the role of print and other mass media in this model, and the supposition that democracy was the *terminus ad quem*, are now in peril and ripe for re-evaluation.

2. *Anonymous Authorship in the Public Realm: Origins*

The power of anonymity to enable dissident speech and writing, particularly when addressing and critiquing the rich and powerful, was not invented or 'discovered' in the early modern West. It was not without reason that many eighteenth-century correspondents assumed pseudonymous identities which drew upon authorial traditions in ancient Greece and Rome, where hidden authorship signified the protest of the street, the *agora* and the *vox populi* (preserved serendipitously for instance in the graffiti of Pompeii).¹⁸ Personified anonymous 'Rumour' featured in the writings of classical antiquity, memorably in Virgil's *Aeneid* as a monstrous creature with a thousand eyes and tongues, regarding each person with intense scrutiny and exposing their deeds to the censure of the world: 'A terrible, grotesque monster, each feather upon whose body (Incredible though it sounds) has a sleepless eye beneath it, And for every eye she has also a tongue, a voice and a pricked ear.'¹⁹

From the ancient tales of Gilgamesh through to the Iliad and Beowulf, the origins of literary writing are deeply intertwined across time and cultures with an ancient and established tradition of writing under unsigned or concealed identities.²⁰ But the reasons for this are various and complex, not least because the earliest written genres drew upon oral traditions that were shaped by countless voices. The idea of masking

identity for political reasons, specifically to voice opposition to those in authority, and thus safeguard against dangerous consequences, was just one reason for anonymity, among many. Proverbial wisdom in North Africa indicated the awareness of embodied acts of defiance and resistance to authority were enacted by anonymous 'nameless' folk, offering 'hidden transcripts' that presented accurately the precarity of power relations of which those in authority were only too aware.²¹ From medieval to modern times, literary 'transvestism' mirrored actual disguise and offered the possibility of transcending cultural barriers imposed by gender, ethnicity, status, and religion.²² The relative merits of anonymity in modern journalism is a live topic of debate in media studies today and is often premised upon the assumption that this phenomenon started in the nineteenth century, exemplified in the founding of *The Economist* in 1843.²³ Inherited by the Victorians was a debate which found its origins in the late-Stuart era in England about how to balance transparency and citizenship with accountability for unbridled, at times vicious satire, which could segue into libel and character assassination.

The perils of publishing and disseminating abuse anonymously in print and online in the early 2020s threaten democratic structures and civil society. These circumstances demand that we look more closely again into English print culture at the end of the seventeenth century and the socio-political transformations that were in play with the development of a new, anonymized authorship and mass readership at this time. The origins of this debate take us back to the life and career of author and publisher John Dunton.

3. *John Dunton and the 'Athenian Project'*

John Dunton (1659–1732) is chiefly remembered as one of the most prominent London booksellers of the 1690s, an innovative if somewhat eccentric figure, who made a significant contribution to Whig propaganda in the decades after the constitutional settlement of 1689. His search after novelties led him to experiment with new literary forms, and his influence may be traced in the rise of the eighteenth-century periodical. As has already been observed, the multiple uses of anonymity in print were well established by the late-seventeenth century in various oral and literary traditions. What was new in England at this time however was the technology, infrastructure, and transportation that enabled the production and distribution of mass print culture in the emerging markets of London and provincial towns across the British Isles. Literacy among new sectors of a growing population, and affluence, as well as technological innovation drove market experimentation and specialization. The rise of 'literary journalism' in Europe's first modern metropolis presented an opportunity for developing new genres and print personae which appealed to new audiences of readers.²⁴

In 1710, writing about his 'Athenian project' in retrospect, Dunton called it, not without hyperbole, 'the most entertaining and useful Project this Age has produced'.²⁵ Another feature of Dunton's innovation in the development of late-seventeenth century periodical literature was his realization that in order to escape official censorship, litigation, and 'ensoriousness' in terms of public criticism, it was essential to introduce another ingredient, authorial anonymity, to his epistolary works. In his autobiographical *Life and Errors of John Dunton* (1705), the publishing impresario gave his own account of how he came to devise his 'Athenian project':

I was one Day walking over *St. George's Fields*, and Mr. *Larkin* and Mr. *Harris* were there with me, and on a sudden I made a Stop and said, Well Sirs, I have a THOUGHT I'll not exchange for Fifty Guineas; they smil'd but they cou'd not get it from me. The first idea of it, was no more than a *confused Idea, of concealing the Querist* and answering his Question. However, so soon as I manag'd it to some better Purpose, brought it into form, and hammer'd out a Title for it.²⁶

His scheme was for letters, unsigned by the author, to be taken in at Smith's coffee house in Stocks Market and directed to an anonymous Athenian Society, supposedly a judicious group of twelve men, who provided answers to the questions posed. The project proved to be wildly popular, sustaining the publication of the *Athenian Gazette, or Casuistical Mercury*, later known by its short title, the *Athenian Mercury*, with twice-weekly editions between March 1691 and June 1697, a remarkable run of just over 580 issues at a time when the majority of experimental periodicals folded within just a few months. A number of spin-off projects also proved popular: Dunton found that the female authorial voice represented in his periodical opened up new audiences for airing women's concerns and opinions in print; hence, the *Ladies Mercury* (1693) devoted exclusively to 'female questions' about love, sex, marriage, birth, and family life. The potential for the *Athenian Mercury* to be purchased as an encyclopaedia of knowledge was realized through publication of the *Athenian Oracle*, issued by Andrew Bell in 1703–04, 1706, and 1708, which presented the best of the weekly questions and answers as bound volumes. With the *Athenian Spy* (1704), a spin-off publication containing 'love secrets', and *Athenianism* (1710), Dunton's own account of his question and answer project, the publisher could never be accused of not milking his most popular commercial venture for all that it was worth. The *Athenian Mercury* was undoubtedly Dunton's most commercially successful enterprise and spawned many imitators and associated publications, including Daniel Defoe's *Review* (1704–13) and the *British Apollo* (1708–10). Jonathan Swift wrote an 'Ode to the Athenian Society' (unpublished, 1692) and Charles Gildon composed a 'History of the Athenian Society' (1692).²⁷ The periodical proved to be one of the most innovative journalistic devices of the late-seventeenth century whose influence extended to the more famous literary creations of the early eighteenth century, the *Tatler* (1709–11) and *Spectator* (1711–12).

Within Dunton's original design for the *Athenian Mercury*, there was a symmetry in the anonymous relationship between author and reader and consequently something of an equilibrium in the relationship of disclosure between them. Members of the public could ask questions without revealing their identity, but so too would those answering their questions act in complete anonymity. The Athenian Society (echoing, somewhat ambitiously, the scientific endeavours of the Royal Society) was featured in the frontispiece to Charles Gildon's *History* as twelve men, echoing the composition of a jury, offering their knowledgeable advice on questions submitted by the periodical's readers. The Athenian Society was in fact made up of just Dunton, his brother in law the clergyman Samuel Wesley (father of John and Charles Wesley, the founders of Methodism), and Richard Sault, a Cambridge mathematician, with Dr John Norris (a philosopher) making occasional contributions. Dunton's participation in the Athenian Society was an open secret within the trade since he could not help boasting of his success, but the others remained in the shadows.²⁸

The organization of the periodical's production and preservation of its anonymous format was made possible through the vogue for coffee houses in late-Stuart London. Starting with the first issue of the *Athenian Mercury* in 1691, there was an announcement

by the anonymous editor (in reality, Dunton himself) encouraging readers to send in their questions:

All Persons whatever may be resolved gratis in any Question that their own satisfaction or curiosity shall prompt 'em to, if they send their Questions by a Penny Post letter to Mr. Smith at his Coffee-house in Stocks Market in the Poultry, where orders are given for the reception of such Letters, and care shall be taken for their Resolution by the next Weekly Paper after their sending.²⁹

The 'most Nice and Curious questions' were selected for publication by the Athenian Society. Published on a half-folio sheet of paper, and available to read gratis in coffee houses or by purchasing a copy for a penny from Dunton's *Mercury* women, female hawkers who sold it about the streets, its distribution reached beyond the all-male environment of coffee houses. The original copies, bound as an encyclopaedia, sold for two shillings and sixpence, making it a more durable work of reference for home libraries. In total, there were twenty volumes, all but the last containing thirty numbers.

A typical issue of the *Athenian Mercury* contained between eight and fifteen questions on the broadest range of subjects, 'Divinity, Poetry, Metaphysics, Physicks, Mathematicks, History, Love, Politicks, Oeconomicks, Visions and Revelations'. During the six-year lifespan of the periodical, the Athenian Society grappled with just over five thousand questions. The readers submitted questions which ranged from everyday personal concerns, to abstract metaphysical, scientific, and spiritual issues: 'Were there any men before Adam?' 'What are the causes of a rainbow?' 'Is there an impartial and true history of the world?' 'How can a man know when he dreams or when he is really awake?'³⁰ There was an eclectic, usually indiscriminate and even bathetic mix of subjects, ranging from the metaphysical to the highly personal and quotidian.

When Dunton's 'question-answer project' was launched, it solicited hundreds of anonymous letters, if Dunton's account is to be believed. Even allowing for editorial exaggeration, it was a publishing sensation, inspiring many imitations of the periodical question-and-answer format.³¹ Dunton himself experimented further with the genre, including the *Post Angel, or Universal Entertainment* (1701). This title offered readers a similar question-and-answer format, but much of the same rehashed content as the *Athenian Mercury* ('cleans'd of all its Dross' [sic]) and the multi-volume *Athenian Oracle* (1704), another attempt by Dunton to cash in on the residual popularity of his 'Athenian project'. In addition to the encyclopaedic or 'factual' questions concerning science, mathematics, theology, and history, many more questions from the general public were concerned with matters of personal importance, such as how to conduct a successful courtship, or maintain personal credit, reputation, and honour. From its earliest publication, the periodical proved very popular with female readers, who contributed many of the questions on a range of subject, and received their own spin-off, the brief run of a *Lady's Mercury* (1693), which dealt mainly with matters of the heart, which were perceived to be primarily within the realm of 'female' concerns. A typical question was: 'Whether 'tis convenient for a Lady to marry one she has an aversion for, in Obedience to her parents.'³² The male perspective in courtship was a frequent theme in the *Athenian Mercury*, suggesting that many male readers wished to have their personal problems sorted out, with questions such as 'I have Woo'd a Maid and have got her Consent to marry me, but she refuseth to Consummate the Marriage, unless I will agree to Omit the words in the Matrimony that Oblige her to Honour and Obey her husband'.³³ Gender wars, or the *querelle des femmes*, had a long lineage in popular literary culture across Europe, such as mass-produced courtship ballads and other forms of satirical 'merry books' and pamphlets representing

women's complaints against their menfolk.³⁴ For Dunton, it was less risky to found a periodical that dealt in subjects of domestic, personal, or scientific interest before the lapse of the Press Act in 1695 and provoked commercial interest from a wide range of readers (or 'all men and both sexes' as was advertised weekly in the *Athenian Mercury*). Courtship questions often received witty replies: in answer to the above question, the Athenian Society told the suitor whose fiancée would not promise to honour and obey him 'our judgement is that if she leaves out honour and obey, you should [sic] have the liberty to omit, with my body I thee worship'. Underpinning their responses was a fairly conventional Christian doctrine of heterosexual matrimony, conjugal fidelity, and devotion to the Anglican religion.

Ostensibly, because of Dunton's self-proclaimed convictions as a member of the established Church with strong nonconformist connections through his wife Elizabeth, the publisher could claim that his literary efforts were of a piece with the religious zealotry (sponsored by Queen Mary before her death) to stamp out gambling, drunkenness, lewd behaviour, and other 'vices' that became known as the Reformation of Manners. Another of Dunton's publications, *The Night Walker* (1696), claimed to document his conversations with prostitutes, and their subsequent conversion to a reformed way of life under Christian guidance. It is of course highly questionable whether readers bought his works to learn from moral guidance, or to read the scurrilous revelations which questions in the *Athenian Mercury*, and narratives about the hidden lives of prostitutes, claimed to reveal. At the heart of his commercially successful Athenian project, which tapped into a reading public hungry for novelty, was the mechanism of anonymous catharsis and resolution, even though the resolution was not always complete, nor verifiably successful according to the terms of conventional Christian morality and social respectability. In among the fairly predictable advice to confine sex within marriage and be faithful to one's spouse, the Athenian Society (under Dunton's auspices) took advantage of the opportunity anonymously to air a whole range of desires and behaviours that did not conform to normative standards. Thus, we find someone asking anonymously: 'If a woman and I have promised to live together faithfully like man and wife ... whether the carnal knowledge of one another be in that case fornication.' The Athenian Society pointed out the folly of such behaviour ('besides the Injury it may be to your children if you have any, then 'tis highly dishonourable') while simultaneously broadcasting and inviting contemplation of the illicit sexuality explored in the question.³⁵

John Dunton's contribution to Restoration epistolarity, his 'genius', as he called it, was twofold.³⁶ In the first instance, he recognized the power of enabling the articulation of questions posed, or in the guise of, anonymous 'ordinary' citizens. Such questions were relevant and meaningful to both elite and non-elite audiences of the literate and semi-literate, both men and women, of varying social rank, but particularly to those of the burgeoning, autodidactic middling sorts. Under the guise of anonymity, a new platform for the public articulation of pressing social issues was created, licensing unusual levels of freedom to explore all manner of questions which were answered with an equal degree of licence by authors who also concealed their identity. This departure from convention, which normally limited public disclosure of personal questions (for highly varied reasons, whether shame, fear of being labelled ignorant, sinful, or even criminal), provided a new, entertaining, shocking, and compelling read for late-Stuart audiences. But anonymity in print also presented new risks in constructing what was ultimately a fragile public sphere which had a built-in fatal flaw: the anonymity which helped constitute 'democratic' public debate also licensed the possibility of unlimited public abuse without accountability.

4. *The Social Consequences of Anonymity*

Anonymous authorship, harnessed to new technologies of print from the end of the seventeenth century, was exploited commercially among newly literate mass readerships and audiences for the first time by John Dunton and copied by many of his contemporaries and literary descendants. Anonymity was not just novel: it was powerful, as a vehicle for overcoming customary and legal barriers to free, critical expression, which could be levied with impunity against authorities and anyone in the public eye. As we have seen, the epistolary form of Dunton's most successful publishing venture, the *Athenian Mercury*, was distinguished by the anonymous format he devised, which enabled authors to articulate their 'true' questions (or to create the late-Stuart equivalent of alternative online personas that enabled them imaginatively to do so), and having them answered by a similarly anonymous group of self-styled learned men. The advantages of anonymity were clear in devising a project which enabled autodidacts, men of humble origins, and indeed women of all ranks, to ask any question on any topic, without fear of shame or retribution. Equally, the Athenian Society who composed replies to the questions they received could do so with practical impunity, speaking with a frankness on traditionally taboo subjects, such as advice on sexual mores, and contentious, even dangerous questions that absorbed theologians, politicians, and scientists. Historians, following Habermas, have tended to highlight, even celebrate, the possibilities that this created for the validation of human ingenuity, regardless of gender, religious conviction, or social rank: anyone could now participate in the public sphere.

But, as proposed above, it is now time to re-evaluate the desirability of anonymous authorship, in an era when anonymity has provided a cloak for the generation of 'fake news', undermining rational/critical discourse in the public sphere and licensing unbridled character assassination with threats of violence, levelled in particular (but not exclusively) at women and other excluded, minority or subordinate groups, even to the extent that western democracies themselves no longer seem secure. It seems likely that the constitutive quality of anonymity in enabling the development of the Habermasian public sphere was also a time bomb, one that proved ultimately to be the fatal flaw of western democratic culture.

The perils of anonymity in mass-produced epistolary print were evident from their earliest incarnation. The early editions of the *Athenian Mercury* are polite and respectful in tone towards readers, but, as it progressed over the years, the tone and content of the periodical degenerated into more lurid and abusive phraseology. This occurred in a manner which must have appeared shocking to readers at first, but which over time helped perpetuate in print what we might term the 'normalisation of offence'. Once the novelty of the periodical and its format had worn off, commercial imperatives fuelled the need to increase a sensationalism that John Dunton — as the publisher and editor of the *Athenian Mercury* who shouldered most of the financial risk of this venture and as editor was also the main person to profit by it — knew would sustain public interest. From the outset, the Athenian Society claimed their design was simply 'to satisfy all *ingenious and curious Enquirers* into *Speculations*' and that anonymity would 'remove those Difficulties and Dissatisfactions, that shame or fear of appearing ridiculous by asking Questions, may cause several persons to labour under'. Those questions could now be resolved 'without knowing their Informer'.³⁷ Elaborate courtesy and deference towards their readers who submitted questions characterized early correspondence published in the *Athenian Mercury*, as did the Society's respect for the anonymity of their readers. For example, in an early issue, in response to a question about an ingenious 'machine' that could demonstrate the much-debated phenomenon of

perpetual motion, the Athenian Society asked the author of the question to disclose his identity so he could make his invention known to the world, if 'it had been the Authors Policy to have mentioned his Name and Design to have made it publick, but he knows his own time for that'.³⁸ An advertisement in the *Athenian Mercury* reassured readers in May 1691 that they supported rigorous, scientific empiricism, and respected the anonymity of amateur scientists: 'If any Person whatever will send in any New Experiment or curious Instance, which they know to be truth, and matter of fact, circumstantiated with Time and Place, we will insert it in our Mercury (but we shan't use the Author's Name without his Licence)'.³⁹ Forms of mild and satirical 'banter' are present in the early editions, particularly when addressing female correspondents, or when addressing subjects relating to 'gender wars' and the long-established tropes of the *querelle des femmes*: for example, the Athenian Society quipped that if men proposed that women have no souls, 'it is because they have none themselves'.⁴⁰

We may contrast these early editions from the late Spring of 1691 with the later editions up to 1697, when Dunton's fortunes were declining, and the novelty of his Athenian project had long worn off. His agility in spotting the market for a periodical devoted exclusively to questions purportedly from female correspondents, or which dealt chiefly with affairs of the heart and other private matters, has already been noted. The various 'voices' in the text of the *Athenian Mercury* complicate the interpretation of its content and authorial style, but we can be fairly confident that the more polemical sections were composed by Dunton himself (and comparison with later spin-off publications, such as the meandering *Athenian Sport* and scabrous *Athenian Spy* would seem to confirm this). To provide just one illustration, by IX, Issue 15 (1693), the Athenian project was well established, and a sense of rivalry with another 'club' of writers emerges in an answer to a question about how the Athenian Society can tell whether an anonymous letter addressed to them is written by a man or a woman (receiving by return a rant, doubtless penned by Dunton as the editor of the *Athenian Mercury*):

Answ: Tho the present Query comes from a *Club*, as 'tis express'd in the *Letter*, all of which 'twas too tedious to insert, yet we see they are all of 'em so unhappy as to keep bad Company, none but their own *dear selves*, and *Women* just like 'em; for it seems they are acquainted with none of that Sex that have any more than five (at most six) *Seneces*, nor it seems can any of their poor *Mistresses* so much as *Write* or *Read*, unless such *Scrawls* as usually come from *Women* of no good Quality.⁴¹

In contrast to the answers of Sault, Norris, and Wesley, which were larded with scholarly references on matters of mathematical, scientific, or theological debate from university-educated men, Dunton the autodidact interposed in the text an increasingly vitriolic anonymized attack on his rivals and those who questioned his Athenian project. Whether his increasingly polemical tone was intentional, a puff to arouse further controversy and keep his profits going, or whether they reflected a genuinely wounded Dunton, who came under sustained attack from his Grub Street rivals, is an unnecessarily binary question.

5. Dunton: Later Years and Decline

As is well known to anyone familiar with his standard biographies, Dunton's fortunes declined upon the death of his wife Elizabeth in the late 1690s, and his published outputs became increasingly erratic and the tone of his writing volatile and suggested of a troubled

mental state.⁴² Dunton reflected bitterly in the preface to his *Athenian Sport* (1707), yet another attempt to capitalize on the vestigial popularity of his most successful project:

The *Question Project* (of which there were Three Editions under the Title of *Athenian Mercury*, and Three under *Athenian Oracle*) ow'd its Rise and Fame to the Injury S[prat] did me. And the *Athenian Sport* springs from that vile Partiality the World discovers to such as are *Rich* and *Fortunate*, and the ill Treatment it gives to others; which being my own Case, it put me on writing a Paradox proving – *No Man is Honest, or Chaste, but he that is Rich.*⁴³

Having generated a modicum of interest in unveiling the secrets of a close-knit network of Grub-street hack authors, rival publishers, and would-be literary aspirants with his autobiographical *Life and Errors*, Dunton's output became indiscriminate, prolific, and increasingly zealous in its denunciation of high-Tory politics. *Dunton's Whipping-Post: or, a Satyr upon Every Body* (1706) promised a 'secret-history of the weekly writers' and was addressed 'To the Interloping Whipsters. You do not Jerk the Times; [you] are like the Fleas, You bite the Skin but leap from the Disease'. This was closely followed by a poke at fashionable society, in which Dunton threw in his lot with the most bawdy if not scatological authors of the day: *Bumography: or, a Touch at the Lady's Tails* (1707). As he grew more desperate to fend off his creditors, and his hopes of restored fortune dashed by a disastrous second, unhappy marriage, Dunton turned his attention to petitioning George I and the 'Protestant associates of Great-Britain' with a series of pro-Hanoverian diatribes. In these later works, he positioned himself as a suffering patriot whose pitiful downfall was due to his unrelenting service to the Crown and the Whig cause ('my constant Adherence to the Protestant Interest in general, daily increased, even after my quitting Business, and retiring to a *private Life*, upon account of severe and frequent Returns of the *Stone and Rheumatism*').⁴⁴ He became, of his own fashioning, 'Dunton's ghost, civilly dead' whose demise was brought about by his contribution to spreading 'Whig-loyalty [...] at a great Expence' throughout the realm at a moment of Jacobite insurgency. His 'unrewarded services' brought about an erasure of his selfhood, livelihood, and citizenship, whose advocates (anonymously voicing Dunton's cause) featured as an '*Unknown and Disinterested CLERGY-MAN*'.⁴⁵ In later years, he rehashed and reprinted some of his earlier works, in the hope of finding new patronage from the Hanoverian regime and rescuing himself from poverty. This attempt largely failed, and so the reference to his own anonymous erasure (an editorial 'privilege' which he had exploited in full through his various Athenian projects) takes on a new poignancy, considering the decline of his fortune and reputation among his peers in later life, and his posthumous obscurity:

But since so many Pictures I have shown,
Mine (BY A PRIVILEGE) shou'd be unknown.⁴⁶

With increasingly frantic and implausible attempts to rescue his own fortune and reputation among the reading public and his peers in the world of publishing, such was the end of Dunton's career in poverty and increasing obscurity. The power of anonymity had been his 'ingenious' discovery, but its power proved beyond his control and engulfed his literary and personal end.

6. Conclusion

Dunton's most significant innovation was to realize the power of anonymous authorship in personal, commercial, and political terms. His career significantly enabled the

development of an embryonic public sphere, one that engaged newly-literate groups of bourgeois readers and correspondents of both sexes. But the time is ripe for us to look again at other, more pernicious aspects of the licensed anonymity which Dunton unleashed on a commercial scale: that is, the way in which it helped to normalize anonymous abuse in print. Over the course of many decades and even centuries, this phenomenon mutated and was far from unilinear. Its force was multiplied and amplified over time, not least in the twenty-first century in the transition to online social media where anonymity shields a plethora of behaviours that are not only abusive, but often criminal. After years of sustained reputational damage and mockery in print, John Dunton ended his days disillusioned, penniless, barely sane, and destitute. Dunton invented 'trolling', and he was its first victim.

NOTES

1. The author would like to thank Meghan Kobza for the inspiration behind this article via the conference *Anonymity Unmask'd* (Newcastle University, 2018). Thanks also to Karen Harvey for stimulating discussion, and the organizers and participants at the *Restoration Epistolarity* conference (University of Erlangen, 2021), particularly Gerd Bayer and Jaro Jasenowski.

Helen Berry, *Gender, Society and Print Culture in Late Seventeenth-Century England* (Ashgate, 2003; repr. Routledge, 2017).

2. See, for example, Urmi Bhowmik, 'Facts and Norms in the Marketplace of Print: John Dunton's *Athenian Mercury*', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 36.3 (2003), 345–65; Mary Beth Norton, 'John Dunton and the Invention of the Feminine Private', in *Separated by Their Sex: Women in Public and Private in the Colonial Atlantic World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), pp. 76–104. Of enduring value are Gilbert D. McEwan, *The Oracle of the Coffee House: John Dunton's Athenian Mercury* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library Press, 1972), and Stephen Parks, *John Dunton and the English Book Trade* (New York: Garland Press, 1976).

3. See Iona Italia, *The Rise of Literary Journalism in the Eighteenth Century: Anxious Employment* (Routledge: London, 2005).

4. In an early analysis, J. Paul Hunter commented on Dunton's eclectic output and his 'strange and wonderful' autobiographical work, *The Life and Errors of John Dunton, Late Citizen of London* (London, 1705); see J. Paul Hunter, 'The Insistent I', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 13.1 (1979), 19–37.

5. Hereafter referred to in contracted form as the *Athenian Mercury*, as is it is more commonly known.

6. Ángel Arrese, 'The Evolution of Anonymity in *The Economist*', *Media History*, 28.1 (2022), 111–24.

7. The limitations of Habermas's model, not least its Eurocentrism and periodization, spawned a burgeoning literature in the 1990s following its translation into English: see *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. by Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), passim, although the significance of his public sphere hypothesis has not diminished. For comparative global and critical perspectives on the respective role of public and private spheres in relation to wealth creation and the challenge of democratic cultures, see Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, who in relation to India have advocated 'the necessity for the lives, needs, rights and demands of underprivileged people to command greater attention in public discussion and policy making, and in democratic politics'; see Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *An Uncertain Story: India and its Contradictions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. xi.

8. Brian Cowan, 'Public Spaces, Knowledge and Sociability', in *Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed. by Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 259–60. For the continued challenge to periodization and central tenets of Habermas's hypothesis (in the same vein as Calhoun et al.), see also Steven C. A. Pincus, 'The State and Civil Society in Early Modern England: Capitalism, Causation and Habermas's Bourgeois Public Sphere', in *The Politics of the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*, ed. by Peter Lake and Steven C. A. Pincus (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 213–31.

9. Brian Cowan, 'Making Publics and Making Novels: Post-Habermasian Perspectives', in *Oxford Handbook of the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, ed. by J. A. Downie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); David Randall, 'Epistolary Rhetoric, the Newspaper, and the Public Sphere', *Past and Present*, 198 (February 2008), 3–23.

10. For the various European 'publics' constituted by print culture and their overlapping evolution, see *Forms of Association: Making Publics in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Paul E. Yachnin and Marlene Eberhart, Massachusetts Studies in Early Modern Culture (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015).

11. A corrective to a Whiggish or overly parochial, Anglocentric interpretation is Mark Goldie and Clare Jackson, 'Williamite Tyranny and the Whig Jacobites', in *Redefining William III: The Impact of the King-Stadholder in International Context*, ed. by Esther Mijers and David Onnekink (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 177–99.

12. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere; an Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962), transl. by Thomas Burger (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 59.

13. For Wills coffee house, see Jonathan Swift, 'Hints Towards an Essay on Conversation', in *Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, ed. by Herbert Davis and Louis Landa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939–68), IV, 90; see also Jenny Uglow, *Hogarth: A Life and a World* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), p. 21; for Lloyds, see John McCusker, 'The Early History of Lloyd's List', *Historical Journal*, 64 (1991), 427–31; for Buttons, see Aytoun Ellis, *Penny Universities* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1958), pp. 150, 159–74, 230.

14. Peter Clark and R. A. Houston, 'Culture and Leisure, 1700–1840', in *Cambridge Urban History of Britain, II, 1540–1840*, ed. by P. Clark (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 79, repeat the rather high figure of over two thousand coffee houses in London by 1700. Their source is not given, but the figure was cited originally by Ellis in *Penny Universities*, xiv, and has subsequently acquired the status of an urban myth. Roy Porter opts for the more realistic figure of five hundred coffee houses by the death of Queen Anne in *London: A Social History* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 205–06. Porter compares this number with the 447 taverns, 5875 beer houses, and 8659 brandy shops in the capital at the time.

15. This theme was captured for the wider reading public at the dawn of the internet in C. John Sommerville, 'Surfing the Coffee House', *History Today*, 47.6 (June 1997), 8–10.

16. Markman Ellis, *The Coffee-House: A Cultural History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2004); Brian Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

17. Ronald M. Baecker, *Computers and Society: Modern Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), particularly Chapter 5, 'Free speech, politics and government'.

18. From evidence in Mary Beard, *Pompeii: The Life of a Roman Town* (London: Profile, 2009), it is possible to compare the survival of over 2500 political posters with attributable named candidates and signwriters with the 'hundreds and hundreds' of anonymous (often abusive and obscene) graffiti scrawled around the walls of the Basilica in Pompeii; see pp. 188–89, 202.

19. Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book IV, transl. by C. Day-Lewis (Doubleday: New York, 1953), p. 86.

20. A single-volume, if Anglocentric, overview is John Mullan, *Anonymity: A Secret History of English Literature* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 2007), where the Epilogue reflects further on a global half-millennium of anonymous writing.
21. J. S. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1991).
22. Meghan Kobza, *The Masquerade: Unmasking Georgian London* (forthcoming, Yale University Press: New Haven, 2025); Mullan, *Anonymity*, Chapters 3 and 4.
23. Ángel Arrese, 'The Evolution of Anonymity in *The Economist*', *Media History*, 28.1 (2022), 111–24.
24. Iona Italia, *The Rise of Literary Journalism in the Eighteenth Century: Anxious Employment* (London: Routledge, 2005).
25. John Dunton, *Athenianism: or, The New Projects of Mr. John Dunton, Athenianism* (London: Thomas Darrack, 1710), p. i.
26. John Dunton, *Athenianism: or, The New Projects of Mr. John Dunton*, pp. 114–15.
27. Berry, *Gender, Society and Print Culture*, pp. 22–23.
28. Berry, *Gender, Society and Print Culture*, pp. 18–21.
29. *Athenian Gazette, or Casuistical Mercury* [henceforth *Athenian Mercury*], 1, no. 1 (17 March 1690).
30. For the extraordinary range of 'casuistical' questions printed in the *Athenian Mercury*, see Berry, *Gender, Society and Print Culture*, Chapter 5 and *passim*.
31. An extended discussion of the authenticity of readers' letters appears in Berry, *Gender, Society and Print Culture*, Chapter 3.
32. The first issue in the *Lady's Mercury*, which ran for only three months, was published on 27 February 1693; see Nicola Parsons, 'The Ladies Mercury', in *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1690–1820s: The Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Jennie Batchelor and Manushag N. Powell (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2018), pp. 315–26.
33. *Athenian Mercury*, x, no. 14 (13 May 1693).
34. Margarete Zimmermann, 'The *Querelle des Femmes* as a Cultural Studies Paradigm', in *Time, Space, and Women's Lives in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Anne Jacobson Schutte, Thomas Kuehn, and Silvana Seidel Menchi (Kirkville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2001), pp. 17–28.
35. *Athenian Mercury*, xi, no. 1 (11 July 1693).
36. For an authoritative overview of the extensive literature on the emergence of epistolarity as a genre, see Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500–1700* (Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 2005); more specifically on Dunton's contribution in this context, see an excellent recent analysis in Gerd Bayer and Jaroslaw Jasenowski, 'Dragging out the Truth: Restoration Periodicals and the Textual Creation of Gendered Identities', *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 79 (November 2019), 1–31.
37. *Athenian Mercury*, 1, no. 1 (17 March 1690).
38. *Athenian Mercury*, 1, no. 10 (25 April 1691).
39. *Athenian Mercury*, 1, no. 14 (9 May 1691).
40. *Athenian Mercury*, 1, no. 18 (23 May 1691).
41. *Athenian Mercury*, ix, no. 15 (31 January 1693).
42. See Helen Berry (3 January 2008), Dunton, John (1659–1732), bookseller, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* <<https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-8299>> [accessed 28 July 2023].
43. *Athenian Sport*, preface, p. xxi.

44. John Dunton, *The Neck-Adventure: Or the Case and Sufferings of Mr. John Dunton* (London: [s.n.], 1715), p. 7.
45. Dunton, *The Neck-Adventure*, p. 7.
46. Dunton, *The Neck-Adventure*, p. 7.

HELEN BERRY is Professor of History at the University of Exeter, UK. She has published extensively on the social and cultural history of Britain in the long eighteenth century, including studies of coffee houses, print culture, and the rise of eighteenth-century newspapers. A prizewinning Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, her most recent book is *Orphans of Empire: The Fate of London's Foundlings* (Oxford University Press, 2019).