CHAPTER 4

News Networks: Putting the ‘News’ and ‘Networks’ Back in

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Around 1790 the Scottish antiquarian George Chalmers discovered in the British Museum a newspaper entitled The English Mercurie, dated 1588. This was the earliest printed news serial not only in England but in Europe. Chalmers proceeded to publish (in 1794) the first attempt to sketch a history of the newspaper in Britain—and in many respects his was an imaginative exercise, and one that sensitively located innovation in its commercial and cultural circumstances. Importantly his discovery meant that neither the French nor the Germans were first to invent the newspaper: at last the British had done something first. His claims went unchallenged for some decades, but in 1839 The English Mercurie was proved to be a forgery made half a century before Chalmers’ discovery by Philip Yorke, second Earl of Hardwicke (his intentions are not known). The proof was offered in a pamphlet by Thomas Watts, a librarian at the British Museum, based on clear bibliographical evidence: Chalmers had been carried away by British patriotism. What could be more fitting than that the modern history of the newspaper—the form itself characterised by accusations of deliberate or inadvertent lies, and with imputations of credulity to early readers—should itself begin with a falsehood?

The history of the newspaper (and therefore, at that time, of news) was established between about 1850 and about 1880: stories developed in parallel in Britain, France, Spain and Portugal and no doubt elsewhere. In Britain this

2 Thomas Watts, A letter to Antonio Panizzi ... on the reputed earliest printed newspaper: the English Mercurie 1588 (London, 1839).
was partly in response to Chalmers’ error, as a number of historians—some of them journalists—sought to establish a more secure narrative of events. The ideological framework for this narrative can be found in The Periodical Press of Great Britain and Ireland: Or An Inquiry into the State of the Public Journals, Chiefly as Regards their Moral and Political Influence, published anonymously in 1824, which articulates the Whig view of the newspaper as both an engine for moral reform and a means of holding government accountable, and identifies the English press as internationally pre-eminent. The anonymous author is more concerned with present-day matters than history, though he does offer a brief account of the early modern origins of the newspaper in a long footnote that refers to The English Mercurie.4 Then the great Whig histories of the English press began, following Watts’s pamphlet, with Frederick Knight Hunt’s magnificent two-volume The Fourth Estate: Contributions Towards a History of Newspapers and of the Liberty of the Press, published in 1850. Hunt explicitly acknowledged the impact of Watts’s work by reproducing a good part of it. He was followed, improbably given the ideological complexion of the emerging narrative, by Cucheval Clarigny’s Histoire de la presse en Angleterre et aux etats unis (three volumes in 1857), and then Alexander Andrews’s The History of British Journalism, from the Foundation of the Newspaper Press in England, to the Repeal of the Stamp Act in 1855, with Sketches of Press Celebrities (two volumes in 1859); Joseph Hatton’s Journalistic London. Being a Series of Sketches of Famous Pens and Papers of the Day (1882); and Henry Richard Fox Bourne’s English Newspapers: Chapters in the History of Journalism (two volumes in 1887). By this time a clear narrative was in place, one that would hold until the end of the next century.

The narrative has several central characters: first, it is a national story, and the histories of the emergence of periodical news are written from parallel